

*Metaphysics Last: Agostino Nifo on Averroes, Avicenna,
and the Order of the Theoretical Sciences*

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1 Introduction: Agostino Nifo and Averroism

The term Averroism, while having a historical origin, is often understood in modern scholarship as referring to a certain set of philosophical theses which were associated with the name of the Arabic philosopher Averroes (d. 1198) in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and which were defended by his mostly Latin-speaking followers, the Averroists. The doctrine of the unicity of the intellect certainly is the most prominent tenet of Averroism, and the various Renaissance debates surrounding Averroes' theory of the soul and the intellect are well studied.¹ Indeed, the contours of Averroism are fairly clear with respect to psychology.

But we cannot yet give a comprehensive and conclusive answer to the question of

¹ See for instance, among many others, Richard Blum, "The Immortality of the Soul," in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 211–233; Dag Nikolaus Hasse, *Success and Suppression: Arabic Sciences and Philosophy in the Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 196–229; Eckhard Keßler, "The Intellectual Soul," in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. Charles B. Schmitt, Quentin Skinner, Eckhard Keßler, and Jill Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 485–534; Craig Martin, *Subverting Aristotle. Religion, History, and Philosophy in Early Modern Science* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 52–85; Kara Richardson, "Averroism," in *The Routledge Companion to Sixteenth Century Philosophy*, ed. Henrik Lagerlund and Benjamin Hill (New York/London: Routledge, 2017), 145–151.

what Renaissance Averroism means in the field of metaphysics.² Which theories, and which readings of the Aristotelian text were seen as connected to Averroes, and how were they received and discussed in the Renaissance?³

In this paper, I will attempt a very preliminary answer by investigating how a known Averroist such as Agostino Nifo read Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and its various interpretations by Arabic and Latin philosophers, what his position was on a key metaphysical topic, the order of the sciences, and how he used the Latin translation of Averroes' *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics* for his own metaphysical work.

Agostino Nifo (d. 1538) was a prominent member of the so-called Paduan Averroists, a group of Italian philosophers with ties to Padua in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, which includes thinkers such as Paul of Venice, Niccolò Tignosi, Nicoletto Vernia, Alessandro Achillini, Luca Prassicio, Marcantonio Genua,

² These questions are equally open with respect to the fields of logic and natural philosophy (see Richardson, "Averroism," 151–153), although there is recent scholarship showing which positions were associated with Averroes and the Averroists, see for instance the contributions in Paul J.J.M. Bakker, ed., *Averroes' Natural Philosophy and Its Reception in the Latin West* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2015).

³ Some work has been done on the Renaissance reception of certain topics within Averroes' metaphysical thinking, and of his *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics*; see, for instance, Paul J.J.M. Bakker, "Fifteenth-Century Parisian Commentaries on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*," in *A Companion to the Latin Commentaries on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, ed. Fabrizio Amerini and Gabriele Galluzzo (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 575–629; Dag Nikolaus Hasse, "Spontaneous Generation and the Ontology of Forms," in *Classical Arabic Philosophy: Sources and Reception*, ed. Peter Adamson, (London: The Warburg Institute, 2007), 150–175; Dag Nikolaus Hasse, "Averroes' Critique of Ptolemy and its Reception by John of Jandun and Agostino Nifo," in *Averroes' Natural Philosophy and Its Reception in the Latin West*, ed. Paul J.J.M. Bakker (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2015), 69–88; Edward P. Mahoney, "Metaphysical Foundations of the Hierarchy of Being According to Some Late-Medieval and Renaissance Philosophers," in *Philosophies of Existence: Ancient and Medieval*, ed. Parviz Morewedge (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 165–257; Leen Spruit, "Intellectual Beatitude in the Averroist Tradition: The Case of Agostino Nifo," in *Renaissance Averroism and Its Aftermath: Arabic Philosophy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Anna Akasoy and Guido Gigliotti (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), 125–144.

Francesco Vimercato, and Antonio Bernardi.⁴ Nifo was one of the most important scholars of Latin Aristotelianism and represents, in a sense, the culminating point of Renaissance Averroism.⁵

He was extremely interested in Averroes and his reading of Aristotle. Nifo wrote several commentaries on original works by Averroes, such as the *De substantia orbis* and the *Tabāfut al-tabāfut*.⁶ He also composed numerous commentaries on Aristotle's works on natural philosophy, logic, and ethics, some of which are super-commentaries on Averroes' commentaries on these works.⁷ And, most importantly for

⁴ See Guido Giglioli, "Introduction," in *Renaissance Averroism and Its Aftermath: Arabic Philosophy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Anna Akasoy and Guido Giglioli (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), 10–12; Hasse, *Success and Suppression*, 189–192; John Monfasani, "The Averroism of John Argyropoulos and his *Quaestio utrum intellectus humanus sit perpetuus*," *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 5 (1993): 164–165.

⁵ See Lohr, *Latin Aristotle Commentaries*, 282–287; Edward P. Mahoney, "Agostino Nifo," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London: Routledge, 1998), 867–872. The position that Nifo's time was the apex of Western Averroism has been convincingly advocated by Charles B. Schmitt, "Renaissance Averroism Studied through the Venetian Editions of Aristotle-Averroes (with Particular Reference to the Giunta Edition of 1550–2)," in *L'Averroismo in Italia. Convegno Internazionale*, ed. Enrico Cerulli (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1979), 121–142 and by Charles Burnett, "The Second Revelation of Arabic Philosophy and Science: 1492–1562," in *Islam and the Italian Renaissance*, ed. Charles Burnett and Anna Contadini (London: The Warburg Institute, 1999), 185–198.

⁶ On this latter work see Nicholas Holland, "The Transmutations of a Young Averroist: Agostino Nifo's Commentary on the *Destructio Destructionum* of Averroes and the Nature of Celestial Influences," in *Renaissance Averroism and Its Aftermath: Arabic Philosophy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Anna Akasoy and Guido Giglioli (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), 99–123; Heinrich C. Kuhn, "Die Verwandlung der Zerstörung der Zerstörung. Bemerkungen zu Augustinus Niphus' Kommentar zur *Destructio destructionum* des Averroes," in *Averroismus im Mittelalter und in der Renaissance*, ed. Friedrich Niewöhner and Loris Sturlese (Zürich: Spur, 1994), 291–308; Mahoney, "Metaphysical Foundations of the Hierarchy of Being," 198–199; Edward P. Mahoney, "Philosophy and Science in Nicoletto Vernia and Agostino Nifo," in *Scienza e filosofia all' Università di Padova nel Quattrocento*, ed. Antonino Poppi (Trieste: Edizioni Lint, 1983), 135–203.

⁷ Nifo comments, among others, on the *Prior* and *Posterior Analytics*, the *Physics*, the *De caelo*, *De generatione et corruptione*, *De interpretatione*, the *Topics*, and the *Meteorology*; see Lohr, *Latin Aristotle Commentaries*, 282–287; Mahoney, "Agostino Nifo".

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our purpose, Nifo wrote three different commentaries on the *Metaphysics*.⁸ The *Dilucidarium*, on which I will concentrate here, is a commentary in question format which covers all fourteen books of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.⁹ Nifo began to work on this commentary in 1507 in Salerno; he then started teaching in Naples where the work was completed in 1510. It was first published in Naples in 1511.¹⁰

Nifo appreciated Averroes for his efforts in providing a close reading and a literal interpretation of Aristotle's texts. At least in his early years, for instance in his early commentary on Averroes' *Tabāfut al-tabāfut*, Nifo saw Averroes and Aristotle as being in absolute accord and claimed that Averroes was like a transposed Aristotle. This means that Averroes was fully successful as an interpreter of Aristotle and was correct in his understanding of Aristotle's works, according to Nifo.¹¹ In his super-

⁸ Besides the *Dilucidarium*, these are *In duodecimum Metaphysices Aristotelis et Averrois volumen commentarii* (Venice: Alexander Calcedonius, 1505), and *Expositiones in Aristotelis libros Metaphysices* (Venice: Hieronymus Scotus, 1559).

⁹ The *editio princeps* gives as the full title: *Eutycki Augustini Nyphi Philothei Suessani metaphysicarum disputationum dilucidarium* (Naples: Sigismundus Mayr, 1511). There is also a later edition, which gives the title *Dilucidarium Augustini Niphi Suessani Philosophi solertissimi metaphysicarum disputationum in Aristotelis decem et quatuor libros Metaphysicorum* (Venice: Hieronymus Scotus, 1560). In the following, the folio-numbers refer to the Naples edition. Edward P. Mahoney, "Agostino Nifo and Neoplatonism," in *Il Neoplatonismo nel Rinascimento*, ed. Pietro Prini (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1993), 219, describes the work as "a careful analysis – but not a commentary – of the contents of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*" – a statement with which I disagree. The *Dilucidarium* is a commentary in question format: Nifo covers the books of Aristotle's *Metaphysic*, follows their order, and answers questions directly related to the respective passages of the *Metaphysic*. He explains the content and the philosophical implications of the text and interprets it.

¹⁰ Lohr, *Latin Aristotle Commentaries*, 284.

¹¹ In the above-mentioned commentary on the *Tabāfut al-tabāfut*, on which Nifo started working in 1494 (Lohr, *Latin Aristotle Commentaries*, 282), he writes: *vel si non valet velle audire a sacerdote Aristotelis, scilicet Averroes, cur haec quidem tenet* ("Or, if this [argument] is not valid, I would want to listen to the priest of Aristotle, namely Averroes, why he really holds this"); Agostino Nifo, *In librum Destructio destructionis Averrois commentarii* (Lyon: Scipio de Gabiano, 1529), disc. I, *dubium* 18, fol. 43r (all translations are mine, unless otherwise noted). Later in the work he adds: *et quia fundamenta averrois sunt convenientia principiiis*

commentary on Averroes' commentary on book XII of the *Metaphysics*, Nifo states that only a follower of Averroes is truly a follower of Aristotle.¹²

For Nifo, Averroes was the central point of reference in all of his own works. But what does that mean in the context of his metaphysical works? How does Nifo's Averroism manifest itself in the metaphysical discussions in which Nifo clearly was very interested? Which of Averroes' theses or readings of the Aristotelian text does he adopt or use, and how?

In the following, I will analyze Nifo's discussion of the order of the sciences and of the role of metaphysics as compared to the other theoretical sciences, as he presents it in his *Dilucidarium* on the *Metaphysics*. This is a topic frequently discussed in Medieval and Renaissance commentaries on the *Metaphysics*, but Nifo's discussion is unique due to his focus on the opinions of his Arabic predecessors, Avicenna and Averroes. Nifo states from the outset that all thinkers agree that metaphysics is the ultimate science. Then, however, he presents arguments by Avicenna and a group of younger metaphysicians in favor of this thesis and refutes them, before presenting his own answer. But why do Nifo's counterarguments against these other thinkers not disprove his own position? I will point out three different systematical problems for

aristotelis ideo consecretus sum dicere meis scholaribus quod averroes est aristoteles transpositus. Quando enim homo considerat fundamenta Averrois et colligaverit ea perfecte cum verbis aristotelis non inveniet discrepantia nisi phantastice. ("Because Averroes' foundations correspond to Aristotle's principles, it is therefore my custom to tell my students that Averroes is Aristotle transposed. Because, if someone should consider Averroes' foundations and assemble these perfectly with the words of Aristotle, no discrepancy would be found, unless in an imaginary way"), *ibid.*, disc. VIII, *dubium* 1, fol. 213r (translation Martin, *Subverting Aristotle*, 57, 199, slightly changed).

¹² *Nostro tempore famosus est: ita ut nullus videatur peripateticus nisi averroicus* ("He is so famous in our time, that no one seemed to be Peripatetic unless he was an Averroist"), Nifo, *In duodecimum Metaphysices*, c. 1, fol. 2ra.

Nifo's position and present a way to resolve them by interpreting Nifo's position as heavily influenced by Averroes. In fact, Nifo's argumentation only makes sense if we realize how much his theory is indebted to Averroes.

2 The order of the sciences in Nifo's *Dilucidarium*

In the prologue (*praefatio*) to his *Dilucidarium*, Nifo discusses certain introductory topics, such as the question of whether, and in what sense, metaphysics is useful (*utilis*).¹³ In this context, Nifo also discusses the order of the sciences: There are three different sciences, he says, which study different things: Physics considers that which is connected to matter, metaphysics studies that which is entirely separate from matter, and mathematics that which is separate in a medium way (*medio modo seperata*).¹⁴

Turning to the position of metaphysics as compared to the other theoretical sciences, Nifo declares: Everyone agrees – including both Avicenna and Averroes – that metaphysics is the last and final (*ultimam*) of these sciences. I will call this thesis “the ultimacy of metaphysics.”

¹³ This discussion of the topic goes back to Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of The Healing*, ed. and trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo, Utah: BYU, 2005), book I, 3, 13.9–14.15. The Latin translation is available in Avicenna, *Liber de philosophia prima sive scientia divina, I-IV*, ed. Simone van Riet (Louvain: Peeters, 1977), 18–20, ll. 35–76; the Arabic and Latin, as well as a German translation can also be found in Avicenna, *Grundlagen der Metaphysik: eine Auswahl aus den Büchern I–V der Metaphysik*, ed. and trans. Jens Ole Schmitt (Freiburg: Herder, 2016), 70–74. See Olga Lizzini, “Utility and Gratuitousness of Metaphysics: Avicenna, *Ilāhiyyāt* I, 3,” *Quaestio* 5 (2005): 307–344. Nifo argues against Avicenna's position on utility, see Nifo, *Dilucidarium*, prol., fol. 4v–5v.

¹⁴ We can assume that Nifo is thinking only of the theoretical sciences here.

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Averroes, however, further qualifies this position, as Nifo points out:

*Averroes [concedit metaphysicam esse ultimam] vi metaphysicae commento iii et vii metaphysicae commento xxxix quoniam duplex est ordo: ad nos et ad naturam. Metaphysica est ultima ad nos, prima vero quo ad naturam.*¹⁵

Averroes admits that metaphysics is the ultimate science, in book VI, comment 3, and in book VII, comment 39, of his *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics*, because there is a twofold order, in relation to us and in relation to nature. Metaphysics is ultimate in relation to us, but it is first in relation to nature.

There are two different respects in which we can talk about the order of the sciences, and in which a science can be first or last: On the one hand, a science has a certain position for us, i.e., considered from our own point of view and according to the order in which the sciences present themselves to us. In this sense, metaphysics is the ultimate science. On the other hand, a science has a position according to nature, i.e., according to the sciences' own essential order, regardless of how and in which order humans acquire this knowledge. In this order, metaphysics is the first science. Nifo does not comment on this theory by Averroes, but simply states it.¹⁶

¹⁵ Nifo, *Dilucidarium*, prol., fol. 5v. For the references see Averroes, *Tafsīr mā ba'd at-ṭabī'at*, ed. Bouyges. 3 vols (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1938–48), book VI, c. 3, 714.11–13; book VII, c. 39, 935.5–15. The Latin translation is available in Averroes, *Aristotelis Metaphysicorum libri XIII: Cum Averrois Cordubensis in eisdem commentariis* (Venice: Apud Junctas, 1562, reprint Frankfurt: Minerva, 1962), fol. 147ra; fol. 192ra. The latter passage is much longer in the original Arabic. The gist of the argument has been translated into Latin, however.

¹⁶ This idea is already present in Aristotle who describes metaphysics as the first and worthiest science (*Met.*,

2.1 The arguments of Avicenna

Nifo moves on to Avicenna's explanation of the ultimacy of metaphysics and relates two arguments from Avicenna's point of view. The first is this:

*Est enim post physicam, ut Avicenna dicit, quia ea quae sumuntur hic probantur in naturali philosophia, ut quod generatio sit, et alteratio, et id genus.*¹⁷

[Metaphysics] comes after physics, as Avicenna says, because the things which are accepted here are proved in natural philosophy, like [the fact] that generation exists, and change, and the like.

Nifo ascribes to Avicenna the position that a science which uses the existence of something, by further investigating it or by drawing further conclusions from it, is posterior to the science which proves its existence. Since the existence of phenomena like generation and change is proved in physics, and presupposed in metaphysics, metaphysics is posterior to physics.

At first glance, it is surprising to find a knowledgeable Averroist such as Nifo attributing this argument to Avicenna. Averroes frequently scolds Avicenna for holding that metaphysics proves certain propositions, and that physics takes these over

book VI.1, 1026a19–23), but also mentions that the most universal things – which are treated in metaphysics – are the most difficult (*Met.*, book I.2, 982a23–25). Alexander of Aphrodisias shares this interpretation of Aristotle (see Alexander of Aphrodisias, *In Aristotelis Metaphysica Commentaria*, ed. Michael Hayduck (Berlin: Reimer, 1891), book III.1, 171). But since Averroes articulates the theory especially clearly, and since Nifo ascribes it to Averroes, and discusses it under his name, I will refer to this theory as Averroes' position.

¹⁷ Nifo, *Dilucidarium*, prol., fol. 5v.

from metaphysics. The most prominent example of this is Averroes' ardent criticism of Avicenna's claim that metaphysics proves the existence of the first cause, the necessary being in itself, and that physics presupposes or assumes the existence of this cause.¹⁸

But in book I, 3 of the *Metaphysics* of his *Šifā*, Avicenna indeed claims that many things which are accepted in metaphysics have been proved in physics. He names the same examples which Nifo repeats here, but in addition to generation and change, Avicenna mentions place and time, the dependence of all movers on a mover, and the fact that all movement stops with the first mover.¹⁹ So Nifo clearly was reading and following Avicenna himself, not solely basing himself on Averroes' paraphrases of Avicenna.

Avicenna's second point (as reported by Nifo) is this:

¹⁸ See, for instance, Averroes, *Tafsīr*, book XII, c. 5, 1423.18–1424.2 (Latin translation in Averroes, *Aristotelis Metaphysicorum libri XIII*, ed. Giunta, fol. 293rb). The English translation is available in Averroes, *Ibn Rusbd's Metaphysics. A Translation with Introduction of Ibn Rusbd's Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics, Book Lām*, ed. and trans. Charles Genequand (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 74). See also Averroes, *Tabāfut al-Tabāfut*, ed. Maurice Bouyges (3rd ed. Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1992), disc. IV, 275.11–280.15. The English translation is available in Averroes, *Tabāfut al-Tabāfut. The Incoherence of the Incoherence*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Simon van den Bergh (London: Luzac, 1954. Reprint: Cambridge: E.J.W. Gibb Memorial, 1987), 163–166. For a discussion of Averroes' criticism of Avicenna's proof see Herbert A. Davidson, *Proofs for Eternity, Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 311–335; Amos Bertolacci, "Avicenna and Averroes on the Proof of God's Existence and the Subject-Matter of Metaphysics," *Medioevo* 32 (2007): 61–97.

¹⁹ Avicenna, *Metaphysics of The Healing*, book I, 3, 14.16–19 (Latin translation in Avicenna, *Liber de philosophia prima*, ed. van Riet, 20–21, ll. 77–82; Avicenna, *Grundlagen der Metaphysik*, ed. Schmitt, 76). The last example of a doctrine proved in physics is corrupt in the Latin: The Arabic has *intihā' al-mutaharrikāt ilā muḥarrrik awwal* ("the termination of [all] moved things with a first mover [has been proved in physics]," translation Marmura), the Latin has *quae sunt ea quae moventur ad primum motorem* ("[it has been proved in physics] what those [things] are, which are moved towards the first mover"). See Andreas Lammer, *The Elements of Avicenna's Physics: Greek Sources and Arabic Innovations* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018), 100–109.

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Post mathematicam vero,²⁰ quia non possumus pervenire ad scientiam motorum nisi post scientiam orbium; ad scientiam vero orbium non devenimus nisi post scientiam astrologiae, quae haberi non potest nisi post scientiam geometriae et arithmeticae.²¹

[Metaphysics comes] after mathematics, because we can only arrive at the science of the movers after the science of the spheres. But we can only reach the science of the spheres after the science of astronomy, which we can only possess after the science of geometry and arithmetic.

So metaphysics follows not only after physics, it also follows after mathematics. Nifo adds that, for Avicenna, the remainder of the sciences cannot be ordered as either prior or posterior to metaphysics. This probably means that the practical sciences do not stand in direct relation with metaphysics. They are as independent of the pursuit of metaphysics as metaphysics is of them.

So how should this argument be understood, and what are the different sciences to which it refers? At first sight, “science of the movers” might be read as a reference to physics – which seems to make sense, since physics is traditionally described as studying moveable being. The argument, then, would demonstrate why physics depends on mathematics. We would have to read both arguments as complementary: The first argument shows that physics is prior to metaphysics; the second argument

²⁰ The subject of this sentence, i.e., that which comes after mathematics, should be understood to be metaphysics, parallel to the earlier *Est enim post physicam*, which had introduced the first argument.

²¹ Nifo, *Dilucidarium*, prol., fol. 5v.

shows that mathematics is prior to physics, since the science of the movers depends on mathematics. Therefore, mathematics is indirectly prior to metaphysics.

I think, however, that we need to read *scientia motorum* as a reference to metaphysics itself. First, Nifo does not use this expression anywhere else in the work, it is not a standard synonym for physics by any means. Second, when we look at Avicenna's own wording, which Nifo paraphrases here, we see that Avicenna's argument runs as follows: The final aim of this science, i.e., of metaphysics, is knowledge of the divine government (*tadbīr/ gubernatio*), of the spiritual angels, i.e., the heavenly intelligences (*al-malā'ika al-rūḥāniyya/ angeli spirituales*), and their levels (*ṭabaqāt/ ordo*), and of the order of the spheres (*al-nizām fī tartīb al-aflāq/ ordinatio in compositione circularum*). This knowledge can only be reached through astronomy (*'ilm al-hay'a/ astrologia*). Astronomy, in turn, can only be reached through the sciences of arithmetic and geometry.²²

Two points should be noted:

1. Avicenna very clearly talks about metaphysics as the science dependent on astronomical and mathematical knowledge. He does not mention physics in this argument. Instead, as I pointed out, he explains in some detail which parts of metaphysics exactly need to presuppose astronomy, and thus mathematics, and he stresses the importance of these topics for the overall science of metaphysics: these subjects represent the final aim (*al-ḡarad al-aqsā/ intentio ultima*) of metaphysics. I think that this description – metaphysics as the science culminating in the knowledge of the order of the heavenly intelligences and the spheres – may have caused Nifo to

²² Avicenna, *Metaphysics of The Healing*, book I, 3, 14.19–15.2 (Latin translation in Avicenna, *Liber de philosophia prima*, ed. van Riet, 21, ll. 82–88; Avicenna, *Grundlagen der Metaphysik*, ed. Schmitt, 76).

describe metaphysics as the “science of the movers” in this context, possibly unaware of the ambiguity this would introduce into the argument. This reading is further supported when we take Nifo’s answer to the argument into account (see below).

2. Avicenna only talks about one intermediary science as a step between the discussed science and mathematics: astronomy (*‘ilm al-bay’a*), the science which investigates the order and motion of the heavenly bodies.²³ In the Latin translation of Avicenna this was rendered as *astrologia*, which Nifo uses as well. I think the term should be understood and translated as “astronomy”. *Astrologia* can refer to both astrology and astronomy, but it does not make sense to render it as the English term “astrology” in this context: It is not the science responsible for making predictions based on the heavenly influences on the sublunar realm, i.e., astrology, but the science studying the nature, order, and movement of the heavenly bodies, i.e., astronomy, which is required for a metaphysical understanding of the supralunar intelligences and their order.

But Nifo also adds a step here: In his rendition, the science of the movers, i.e., metaphysics, is not directly dependent on astronomy. Instead, it depends on the science of the spheres, which depends on astronomy. Presumably, Nifo is thinking here of a discipline we might call cosmology, or, more precisely, supralunar physics. It makes sense to consider the investigation of the movements and relations of the spheres and the heavenly bodies as an intermediary between metaphysics and astronomy.

Consequently, I would rephrase Avicenna’s second argument, as presented by

²³ On astronomy in Avicenna see, for instance, Damien Janos, “Moving the Orbs: Astronomy, Physics, and Metaphysics, and the Problem of Celestial Motion According to Ibn Sīnā,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 21 (2011): 165–214.

Nifo, in the following way: The science of mathematics is necessary for, and thus prior to, astronomy, astronomy is prior to supralunar physics, and supralunar physics is prior to metaphysics. Thus, metaphysics is the ultimate science.

Even though Nifo himself agrees with Avicenna on the overall thesis of the ultimacy of metaphysics, he disagrees with Avicenna's reasoning, and argues against both of his points, starting with an objection to the first argument:

*Primo quia quae accepta et probata sunt in naturali philosophia non sumuntur hic ut principia. Sic enim haec scientia subalternaretur illi.*²⁴

First, [Avicenna's reasoning is faulty] because the things which are accepted [in metaphysics] and proved in natural philosophy²⁵ are not taken here as principles. In that case, truly, this science [i.e., metaphysics] would be subordinate to that science [i.e., physics].

The doctrines which are proved in physics cannot be accepted or assumed as principles in metaphysics, because then metaphysics would be subordinate to physics. This implies that Nifo thinks that the argument works too well, so to speak. If

²⁴ Nifo, *Dilucidarium*, prol., fol. 5v.

²⁵ I think this is the only way to make sense of the first phrase of this quotation. It cannot mean "the things which are accepted and proved in natural philosophy", since the same things cannot be presupposed and proved in the same science at the same time. And even if we understand the terms "accepted" and "proved" as disjunctives, why would Nifo want to say that metaphysics does not take anything which is *accepted* in physics as a principle? It does not seem problematic to claim that something could be a principle for the science of metaphysics, and at the same time be accepted in the science of physics. Indeed, this would probably be true for many principles.

Avicenna's premise is true, we can infer not only the ultimacy of metaphysics, but its actual subordination to physics, a science lower than metaphysics. This is evidently a conclusion which Nifo finds absurd. He does not explain this further since metaphysics has been described as the first science ever since Aristotle. Hence, Nifo rejects the claim that metaphysics takes over these physical results as principles.²⁶

Nifo is not satisfied with the second argument either:

*Secundo quia, si mathematica est prior quia sine origine orbium non cognosci possunt motores, etiam metaphysica esset prima, quia sine agnitione motorum non possunt cognosci orbes.*²⁷

Second, because if mathematics were prior on the grounds that the movers cannot be known without the origin of the spheres, metaphysics would be first as well, on the grounds that the spheres cannot be known without knowledge of the movers.

Nifo argues that, for Avicenna, mathematics is prior to metaphysics, with the science of the spheres as an intermediary, because we need to know mathematics in order to understand the origin of the spheres, which, in turn, is prerequisite for

²⁶ It is certainly debatable whether this argument actually works against Avicenna himself, and not just the version of his thought Nifo presents here. Avicenna does not, in fact, claim that metaphysics takes over its principles from another science. What metaphysics takes over from the other sciences are not principles in the strict sense. They are either self-evident in the lower science, or have themselves been derived from metaphysical principles; see Avicenna, *Metaphysics of The Healing*, book I, 3, 15.4–16.18 (Latin translation in Avicenna, *Liber de philosophia prima*, ed. van Riet, 21–23, ll. 90–28; Avicenna, *Grundlagen der Metaphysik*, ed. Schmitt, 76–80). See also Lizzini, “Utility and Gratuitousness,” 340–342, and Bertolacci’s visualization in Avicenna, *Libro della guarigione. Le cose divine*, ed. and trans. Amos Bertolacci (Turin: UTET, 2008), 168–169, fn. 105–107. Quite to the contrary, for Avicenna, metaphysics is the science which confirms (*taḥaqquq*) and certifies (*yaqīn*) the principles of the other sciences, see Avicenna, *Metaphysics of The Healing*, book I, 3, 14.11–15 (Latin translation in Avicenna, *Liber de philosophia prima*, ed. van Riet, 20, ll. 67–76; Avicenna, *Grundlagen der Metaphysik*, ed. Schmitt, 74).

²⁷ Nifo, *Dilucidarium*, prol., fol. 5v.

understanding the movers and mastering metaphysics. But, Nifo points out, an understanding of the movers is necessary in order to understand the spheres. Thus, if Avicenna's claim is true, it should also be true that metaphysics is prior (it is not clear whether prior to the science of the spheres or also to mathematics).

I do not think that this argument is designed to set up a system or order of the sciences. If the relation between metaphysics and cosmology were one of reciprocal dependency, we could not acquire either one of the sciences, or know anything about either movers or spheres, because we would always lack the obligatory knowledge of the other. The argument also leaves open the exact relation between metaphysics and mathematics. Are they on the same level regarding their priority to the science of the spheres? Or is metaphysics prior to both?

Instead, the argument is a *reductio ad absurdum*, revealing the problematic consequences of Avicenna's reasoning. At first glance, it may seem as if Nifo wanted to imply that to consider the conditions of our knowledge of certain issues is not helpful for establishing the order of the sciences concerned with them, but that would be at odds with Nifo's own interpretation, which I will present below. I think that the argument rather serves to show that this criterion is not helpful in this very narrow area of knowledge. To use our knowledge of the spheres in order to set up the order between mathematics and metaphysics produces more problems than it solves. I have stated above that "science of the spheres" seems to refer to cosmology, or supralunar physics, but of course Aristotle also talks about the spheres and their order in *Metaphysics*, book XII. And especially for the aspect Nifo mentions here – the origin of the spheres – it could be argued that it is a metaphysical issue. Nifo seems to hint at the fact that the sciences overlap in this field of knowledge, since the study of the spheres may

belong to different disciplines in different respects. When it comes to the causes of the movement of the spheres in particular, metaphysics and natural philosophy are not easily differentiated. By pointing out this difficulty, Nifo can show the weakness of Avicenna's justification of ultimacy.

Furthermore, this passage supports the above-mentioned interpretation of Avicenna's reasoning. Nifo implies in his answer that metaphysics is the science providing knowledge of the movers. Thus, it makes sense to assume that, in the original argument from Avicenna's point of view, "the science of the movers" was a reference to metaphysics.

2.2 The argument of the *iuniores metaphysici*

Having thus shown the insufficiency of Avicenna's arguments for the ultimacy of metaphysics – the first introducing its subordination instead of its ultimacy to physics, and the second failing to establish its ultimacy with regard to mathematics and the science of the spheres – Nifo discusses and rejects another position, which he ascribes to certain younger metaphysicians:

*Iuniores metaphysici sentiunt hanc esse ultimam quia est difficillimorum; ordo enim adiscendi debet esse a facilioribus.*²⁸

Some younger metaphysicians think that it [i.e., metaphysics] is ultimate, because it is about the most difficult things. For the order of acquiring knowledge has to start from the easier

²⁸ Nifo, *Dilucidarium*, prol., fol. 5v.

things.

According to these unnamed thinkers, learning always starts from easier things and then moves on to more difficult things. Therefore, the science dealing with the most difficult things, i.e., metaphysics, is necessarily the ultimate science. Nifo might be referring here to Thomas Aquinas, who claims in his *Commentary on the Metaphysics* that wisdom, or metaphysics, deals with the most universal things, which are most difficult and furthest removed from the senses. Aquinas, however, not only claims that metaphysics is most difficult, he also thinks that it is first in nature, so he clearly does not think that metaphysics is the last science.²⁹

Nifo replies to this position by reminding his readers that metaphysics is the most certain science according to Aristotle, and that it studies that which is known and imprinted in the soul first, as Avicenna says.³⁰ After this appeal to authority, Nifo presents an argument against the younger metaphysicians' position:

²⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio*, ed. Raymundus M. Spiazzi (Turin/Rome: Marietti, 1964), book I, lesson 2, §44–46. Aquinas is followed in this by other thinkers, for instance, by Gonsalvus Hispanus (d. 1313), see Gonsalvus Hispanus, “Conclusiones Metaphysicae,” in Johannes Duns Scotus, *Opera Omnia*. Vol. 6, ed. Luke Wadding (Paris: Vivès, 1892), book I, concl. 5–12, 602–603.

³⁰ Nifo, *Dilucidarium*, prol., fol. 5v–6r. The references are probably to Aristotle, *Met.*, book IV.3, 1005b9–14, and to Avicenna, *Metaphysics of The Healing*, book I.5, 22.11–24.5 (Latin translation in Avicenna, *Liber de philosophia prima*, ed. van Riet, 31–34, ll. 2–50; Avicenna, *Grundlagen der Metaphysik*, ed. Schmitt, 100–104), for the argument that being, thing, and necessary are known first, and to book I.2, 9.17–10.3 (Latin translation in Avicenna, *Liber de philosophia prima*, ed. van Riet, 12–13, ll. 30–38; Avicenna, *Grundlagen der Metaphysik*, ed. Schmitt, 60), for the claim that the subject-matter of metaphysics is being insofar as it is being. On Avicenna see also Jan A. Aertsen, “Avicenna’s Doctrine of the Primary Notions and its Impact on Medieval Philosophy,” in *Islamic Thought in the Middle Ages. Studies in Text, Transmission and Translation, in Honour of Hans Daiber*, ed. Anna Akasoy and Wim Raven (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 22–27; Michael E. Marmura, “Avicenna on Primary Concepts in the Metaphysics of his al-Shifā’,” in *Probing in Islamic Philosophy: Studies in the Philosophies of Ibn Sina, al-Ghazali and Other Major Muslim Thinkers* (Binghampton, New York: Global Academic Publishing, 2005), 149–169.

*Amplius prima principia, ut de quolibet dicitur esse vel non esse et id genus, sunt comunia omnibus scientiis et non nisi per habitum metaphysicae. Igitur videtur metaphysica prima.*³¹

Further, the first principles – that something is said to either exist or not exist, and the like – are common to all sciences, and only through the habit of metaphysics. Therefore, metaphysics seems to be first.

The first principles can only be explained through metaphysical reasoning. All the sciences equally rely on this metaphysical knowledge, so metaphysics needs to be the first science. Nifo makes clear that he does not refer to principles in the sense of causes here, but to the logical first principles of knowledge like the principle of non-contradiction which he mentions explicitly.

While the references to authority had attacked the younger metaphysicians' premise, i.e., the claim that metaphysics treats the most difficult things, Nifo's argument is aimed against their conclusion, the ultimacy of metaphysics itself. I will discuss this point in more detail below.

2.3 Nifo's own position

Finally, Nifo presents his own solution: metaphysics is indeed ultimate compared to both mathematics and physics. He provides two arguments, the first of which reads as follows:

³¹ Nifo, *Dilucidarium*, prolog., fol. 6r.

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*Mihi itaque videtur metaphysicam esse post mathematicam, quia pro maiori parte ea quae tractantur in metaphysica sunt difficiliora iis quae tractantur in mathematicis, ut saltem quo ad eam partem quae est de substantia et accidente, actu et potentia, et de substantiis separatis, et id genus. Post physicam vero et propter hanc causam.*³²

Therefore, it seems to me that metaphysics comes after mathematics, because, for the most part, the things which are treated in metaphysics are more difficult than those [things] which are treated in the mathematical [sciences], at least when it comes to this part which is about substance and accident, act and potency, and about the separate substances, and the like. In fact, [metaphysics] also comes after physics for this reason.

For Nifo, metaphysics, or at least a substantial part of the science, is ultimate compared to both mathematics and physics, because it treats more difficult topics than the other theoretical sciences.

But there is another reason why metaphysics is ultimate compared to physics:

*et etiam quia subiectum esse huius scientiae praesupponitur demonstratum a naturali, ut asserit Averroes, tam enim ens seperatum per essentiam esse, quam ens seperatum per indifferentiam probatur in naturali.*³³

³² Nifo, *Dilucidarium*, prol., fol. 6r.

³³ Nifo, *Dilucidarium*, prol., fol. 6r.

And also because the existence of the subject-matter of this science is presupposed as demonstrated in physics, as Averroes states. Indeed, the existence of being separate through essence, as well as [the existence] of being separate through indifference is proved in physics.

This argument rests on the thesis, brought forth by Averroes, whom Nifo follows, that the existence of the subject-matter of metaphysics is presupposed in the science itself, while being demonstrated in physics.³⁴ At the beginning of this passage on the order of the sciences, Nifo had stated that metaphysics, unlike physics and mathematics, is about that which is entirely separate from matter. So it is not surprising that he now identifies the subject-matter of this science with separate being.

Nifo explicates what this means by referring to a distinction he has introduced: For Aristotle, metaphysics treats the separate in two senses (*dixit esse de bifario separato*).³⁵ In Nifo's eyes, something can either be separate in itself, through its own essence, existing apart from matter, or it can be separate through indifference, meaning that it is indifferent to matter. Beings which are separate through indifference can be either in matter, or separate from it, but they do not contain a necessary connection to matter in their definition.

Nifo refers to that fact that, on the one hand, Aristotle talks about ontology in his *Metaphysics*, about substance, form and matter, genus and species. This, for Nifo, falls

³⁴ See, for instance, Averroes, *Tafsīr*, book XII, c. 5, 1421.11–1423.11 (Latin translation in Averroes, *Aristotelis Metaphysicorum libri XIII*, ed. Giunta, fol. 292vb–293ra; 1421.14–16 and 1423.8–9 have not been translated into Latin. English translation in Averroes, *Metaphysics*, ed. and trans. Genequand, 73–74).

³⁵ Nifo, *Dilucidarium*, prol., fol. 5r.

under the description of “separate through indifference”. Nifo assumes that all being, considered insofar as it is being, that is, insofar as it shares in the most general features common to all beings, is separate. It is separate through its indifference to the specific way of existence which a given being possesses, since it is only considered as a being and nothing else. That which is separate through its essence, on the other hand, is that which is actually immaterial and separate from matter, i.e., the actual separate substances. Nifo explains that eleven of the fourteen books of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* are concerned with the separate through indifference, and three books are concerned with the separate through essence (he does not specify, but probably thinks of books XII–XIV).³⁶

Nifo’s argument for the ultimacy of metaphysics applies to both types of separate being – beings separate through their essence as well as through indifference are both studied in metaphysics, while their existence is proved elsewhere, namely in physics. This presumably covers all the types of objects which metaphysics investigates – the existence of all of them is taken over and accepted from physics, thus establishing metaphysics’ ultimacy.

So does Nifo really think that the existence of being insofar as it is being can be proved, and is indeed proved in physics? Concluding his discussion of the order of the sciences, Nifo adds:

*Aut potest dici quod haec scientia sumit suum subiectum
suppositis naturalibus et mathematicis, quia nisi essent illa, et
substantiae seperatae, non esset ens separatum per*

³⁶Nifo, *Dilucidarium*, prol., fol. 6r.

*indifferentiam ad omnia, haec de ordine.*³⁷

Or it can be said that this science takes its subject-matter from presupposed physical and mathematical [things], because if these [things] and the separate substances did not exist, there would be no being separate through indifference to all of them.

This [shall suffice] about the order.

There is an alternative, or perhaps additional, explanation for metaphysics' ultimacy: While the existence of the separate substances – the beings separate according to their essence – is proved in the science of physics in a straightforward way, things are different for beings separate through their indifference. Their existence rests on the assumption of the existence of both physical and mathematical beings, and of beings separate through their essence. If only immaterial substances existed in the world, there would be no difference between the two types of separation. The features of being insofar as it is being are taken from the different types of existing things: beings which are completely separate from matter, material, i.e., physical things, and beings which are separate in a medium way, i.e., mathematical things. So in order to establish the existence of the separate through indifference, the existence of the physical and mathematical beings needs to be presupposed. But the existence of the separate through indifference also depends on the existence of the separate through essence, as Nifo will state explicitly later in his commentary.³⁸ In metaphysics, the existence of the

³⁷ Nifo, *Dilucidarium*, prol., fol. 6r. *Suppositum* can mean something like “subject” or “substance,” but since Nifo frequently uses *supponere* and its compound *pracsupponere* in the meaning of “to assume, to presuppose”, I take *suppositis naturalibus et mathematicis* as a reference to genuinely mathematical and physical things whose existence is presupposed in metaphysics.

³⁸ *Esse non potest ens seperatum per indifferentiam, nisi sit ens seperatum per essentiam* (“Being separate

separate substances is taken over from physics. Thus, we can infer that the existence of the beings separate through indifference not only depends on the existence of physical and mathematical beings, as stated above, but also depends, in a second and mediated way, on the science of physics.

How, then, should we understand Nifo's own position on the question of the priority or posteriority of metaphysics as compared to the other theoretical sciences? He clearly states that metaphysics is the ultimate science and that it comes after both physics and mathematics. So when Nifo had claimed, at the very beginning of this treatment of the question, that everyone agrees that metaphysics is the ultimate science, this had included himself as well.

If Nifo thinks that metaphysics is the ultimate science, he is in general agreement with the positions defended by Avicenna and the younger metaphysicians. They, as well, defend the ultimacy of metaphysics. Why, then, does Nifo argue against them? The counterarguments, i.e., Nifo's reasoning against the arguments of Avicenna and the younger metaphysicians, stand uncorrected. Nifo does not mention any objections against them. Hence, we can assume that they represent his own point of view. But then, why should the arguments brought forth against his opponents not apply to

through indifference could not exist, if being separate through essence did not exist.”), Nifo, *Dilucidarium*, book I, disc. 1, ch. 5, fol. 13r. This is true not only for these beings' existence, but also when it comes to epistemology. Our knowledge or cognition of the separate through indifference depends on our knowledge of the essentially separate substances: *aliquae sunt per essentiam abstractae, aliquae per indifferentiam. Et omnes sunt unius generis considerationis, quatenus una illarum immediate dependet ab alia in ratione cognoscendi* (“Some [metaphysical things] are abstract through essence, some through indifference. And all belong to one genus of consideration, given that one of those [types of abstract beings, i.e. the abstract through indifference] depends on the other [i.e., the abstract through essence] with respect to knowing.”), *ibid.*, *prol.*, fol. 6r.

Nifo himself?

One solution to this problem could be that Nifo, after all, does not defend the exact same position he ascribes to Avicenna and the younger metaphysicians. Another solution could be that Nifo disagrees with his predecessors' arguments, while sharing their conclusion. This, however, poses the question of whether Nifo really justifies the position differently than Avicenna or the younger metaphysicians. In effect, we will have to consider three separate problematic cases: (a.) The acceptance of facts from other sciences: How is Nifo's counter-argument against Avicenna's first argument compatible with Nifo's second argument for his own position? (b.) The presupposition of knowledge: How should we understand Avicenna's second argument and Nifo's counterargument, and how is the latter compatible with Nifo's own position? (c.) The difficulty of metaphysics: Which position does Nifo ascribe to the younger metaphysicians, and how are his arguments against them compatible with the first argument for his own position?

I argue that these tensions can be eliminated by reading Nifo strictly as a follower of Averroes. We need to understand Nifo's own position as based on the doctrine which Nifo introduces at the beginning as the position of Averroes: that metaphysics is ultimate in the order of teaching, or learning, but first in the order of nature. Nifo does not argue against Averroes, or this statement. On the contrary, he supports this distinction and utilizes it himself. I propose that Nifo, in his own response to the question, only refers to ultimacy of metaphysics for us, i.e., ultimacy in the order of teaching and learning the sciences.

(a.) The acceptance of facts from other sciences: Avicenna claims in his first argument, according to Nifo, that metaphysics accepts certain facts which are proved

in physics. Nifo argues against this by pointing out that metaphysics does not accept as a principle anything that is proved in physics. Then, however, Nifo himself, in the second argument for his own position, defends Averroes' claim that physics proves the existence of the subject-matter of metaphysics, i.e., the existence of essentially separate being, while metaphysics presupposes this fact. Is Nifo thinking of the order for us, or the order by nature? And how are these statements – Nifo's argument against Avicenna and his own solution – compatible?

Nifo accuses Avicenna of holding that metaphysics takes over physical results as principles. So the problem lies not solely in the fact that a certain doctrine, or the existence of certain things, is proved in physics and then taken over in metaphysics. The role which these assumptions then play for the science of metaphysics is relevant for establishing the order of the sciences. According to Nifo, the existence of generation and change, which for Avicenna are taken over from physics, serve as principles for the science of metaphysics. But then, why are things different when it comes to the proof of the subject-matter of metaphysics, separate being? Depending on how we understand the term 'principle,' it could be true to say, according to the position of Averroes and Nifo, that metaphysics does not accept its principles from physics. Rather, metaphysics accepts the fact that its subject-matter exists. Aristotle himself already employs the distinction between the subject-matter of a science, and a science's principles.³⁹

Even more relevant is Nifo's claim that Avicenna has to accept the conclusion that metaphysics is subordinate to physics. Nifo clearly sees this as a result to be avoided,

³⁹ Aristotle, *Post. An.*, book I.10, 76b11–16.

otherwise his argument would not work. As I mentioned, Nifo adopts Averroes' differentiation between the order among the sciences for us, and the order according to their own nature. He only wants to defend the ultimacy of metaphysics when it comes to the order for us. This allows us to conclude that the fact that a science is the last and ultimate in the order of learning does *not* mean that this science is subordinate to all other sciences. In fact, subordination means precisely that a science is last in the order of nature; that it is substantially posterior, or subordinate to one or several other sciences in itself, according to its own essence; that it is genuinely secondary, or inferior by nature. But ultimacy – i.e., being last in the order of learning – is not subordination.

I believe that Nifo is accusing Avicenna of straying from the claim, defended by Averroes, that metaphysics is the ultimate science for us but the first science in the order of nature. Nifo thinks that Avicenna's version of metaphysical acceptance of the results of another science, namely the acceptance of its principles from physics, constitutes a posteriority of metaphysics, not – or not only – in the order of learning the sciences, but in the order of nature.

Nifo's own position, the position of Averroes, does not incur the same problem. The relation between being which is separate by indifference and the existence of physical and mathematical things constitutes no subordination. The existence of separate being in this sense is only indirectly taken over from another science, or rather, it depends on the existence of the subject-matters of the other sciences. As for essentially separate substances, Averroes himself did not see a contradiction between his two claims that metaphysics is the first science by nature and that it takes over the existence of its subject-matter from an essentially posterior science. Indeed, Nifo explicitly confirms later in the *Dilucidarium* that the acceptance of the existence of

separate substance from physics does not constitute a subordination of metaphysics. He specifies: Physics would be essentially prior to metaphysics if it were to prove the existence of separate substance *a priori*. But physics proves it *a posteriori*, i.e., from motion. The acceptance of the conclusion of an *a posteriori*-proof, however, does not lead to the subordination of metaphysics.⁴⁰

(b.) The presupposition of knowledge: Avicenna's second argument tries to establish the ultimacy of metaphysics by pointing out its dependency on cosmological, astronomical, and mathematical knowledge. Nifo replies to this by remarking that the science of the spheres would then be ultimate compared to metaphysics. Both Avicenna and Nifo are clearly concerned with the sciences' order for us here. Both arguments mention that we need to possess a certain knowledge, or have mastered certain sciences, in order to be able to master another science, or understand the things treated in it. If that is true, Avicenna can indeed conclude that metaphysics is ultimate in the order of learning the sciences.

So in this case, Nifo does not oppose his opponent's actual position but rather his argument for it. As I pointed out above, Nifo counters by showing that Avicenna's argument is inconclusive. The dependency could easily be reversed, due to the lack of clear boundaries between the different approaches of investigating the heavenly movers and spheres. If metaphysical knowledge of the movers did necessarily presuppose physical or cosmological knowledge of the spheres, the opposite could be true as well. Nifo seems to think that this criticism does not apply to his own argument that metaphysics presupposes the existence of separate beings. While it could be

⁴⁰ Nifo, *Dilucidarium*, book I, disc. 1, ch. 5, fol. 13v.

argued, against Avicenna, that mathematics and the science of spheres themselves depend on metaphysics, it does not seem likely that anybody would claim that the physical treatment of separate being presupposes metaphysical knowledge. In Nifo's eyes, his own – and Averroes' – assumption that metaphysics accepts the existence of its subject-matter from physics is less vulnerable to the counterargument that the dependency could be reciprocal.

(c.) The difficulty of metaphysics: Nifo's first argument for his own position, the claim that the things which are studied in metaphysics are more difficult than the things studied in the other theoretical sciences, can only be understood as referring to the order of the sciences for us. The complexity of the topics studied in the different disciplines is relevant for their acquisition, not for their internal or natural order. It may seem as if this were precisely the same point the younger metaphysicians were trying to make: metaphysics is the ultimate science because it treats the most difficult things. But when we look at Nifo's replies to this position, his arguments – which point out that metaphysics is the most certain science, and that it provides knowledge of the first principles – in fact refer to priority of nature, not priority for us. Metaphysics is most certain by nature, since it relies least on sense perception and studies the highest intelligibles. But that does not mean that it cannot be very difficult for us. And metaphysics may systematically introduce and explain the first principles of knowledge and argumentation, but the whole point of the principle of non-contradiction is that we cannot *not* know and use it. Even if I am not trained in metaphysics, I will still be able to use the principle of non-contradiction in my everyday life, and apply it in the context of a particular science to which I choose to dedicate myself – and in fact, I cannot but do so.

So at the heart of the matter, Nifo accuses the younger metaphysicians of defending the claim that metaphysics is last or ultimate in the order of nature. He chooses to understand their statement that metaphysics is the most difficult science to mean that it is the most difficult by nature. And he only argues against this interpretation. For this reason, the counter-arguments work against the younger metaphysicians, at least as they are represented here, but do not work as objections to Nifo's own position. Whether these arguments are successful against those 'younger metaphysicians' themselves is a different question. If Thomas Aquinas is indeed the author against whom Nifo argues here, this is a misrepresentation of his position. Just like Averroes and Nifo himself Aquinas believes that the separate substances which metaphysics studies are known best according to their own nature, but very difficult to know for us.⁴¹

3 Conclusion

Coming back to the initial question of Nifo's Averroism, this short discussion has shown us that, regarding the central question of the role of metaphysics among the sciences, Nifo's position cannot be understood except through Averroes. In fact, Nifo's remarks hardly even make sense unless the reader realizes that when Nifo relates

⁴¹ Thomas Aquinas, *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum*, book II, lesson 1, §§282–285; Thomas Aquinas, *Super librum de causis expositio*, ed. Henri D. Saffrey. 2. éd. corr. (Paris: Vrin, 2002), prol., §§1–2. See Carlos Steel, *Der Adler und die Nachtule. Thomas und Albert über die Möglichkeit der Metaphysik* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2001), 6–10; Carlos Steel, "Siger of Brabant versus Thomas Aquinas on the Possibility of Knowing the Separate Substances," in *Nach der Verurteilung von 1277. Philosophie und Theologie an der Universität von Paris im letzten Viertel des 13. Jahrhunderts*. *Miscellanea Mediaevalia* 28, ed. Jan A. Aertsen (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2001), 211–212.

Averroes' opinion, in the very beginning of the discussion, he tells us his own position.

Nifo adopts the distinction between the ultimacy of a science with regard to learning and its posteriority with regard to its own nature. He also follows Averroes in holding on to the essential priority and superiority of the science of metaphysics, while allowing it to take over the existence of its subject-matter from another, essentially posterior science, namely physics. When Nifo discusses the different names of the science of metaphysics later in the preface, he affirms: Metaphysics is first philosophy, because it occupies the highest place among all philosophies, or theoretical sciences.⁴²

Whereas, as I mentioned, we can cast doubt on the accuracy of his rendering of Avicenna and of the unnamed metaphysicians, Nifo gives a truthful account of Averroes' doctrines, while introducing them into a different context and providing an innovative discussion of the role of metaphysics.

These findings allow us to draw some conclusions regarding the manner in which Nifo's Averroist tendencies express themselves in a metaphysical context: Nifo proves himself to be a follower and defender of Averroes' philosophical positions, even in an area which is not problematic for Christian faith such as the question of the order of the theoretical sciences. He unambiguously presents Averroes' doctrine as his own. He attacks Avicenna's position from Averroes' point of view, even when the discord between the two Arabic philosophers seems minor. He shows himself as not only an avid follower but also an apt interpreter of Averroes. He provides exact references and notices connections between disparate passages of the *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics*, skillfully combining the different parts of Averroes' theory, such as

⁴²Nifo, *Dilucidarium*, prol., fol. 6v.

Averroes' position on the order of acquiring and learning the sciences and his claim that only physics could prove the existence of the separate substances.

So while the question of Nifo's Averroism is complex – for instance, while he first defended the unicity of the material intellect, he later abandoned his adherence to this theory⁴³ – Nifo certainly was one of the foremost experts on Averroes in the Renaissance, a careful reader, innovative interpreter, and fierce defender of Averroes' philosophy.

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⁴³ Hasse, *Success and Suppression*, 206–214.

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