

Liana Saif. *The Arabic Influences on Early Modern Occult Philosophy.* Palgrave Macmillan 2015. 277 pp. \$110.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781137399465).

The role played by Islamic thought in shaping Western culture represents an essential part of the philosophical tradition. The influence exerted on philosophers and theologians belonging to the Latin context covers a wide range of topics, and further basic investigations remain to be done in this area of learning. The fact that the achievement of modern science relegated occult doctrines to the realm of superstition does not eliminate the relevance of their contribution to the understanding of the physical world. Arab thinkers adopted philosophy for interpreting Quranic revelation, trying to base Islamic doctrines on philosophical concepts. The encounter of Arabic and Greek texts brought about important results. It also determined the birth of an original astrological and magical culture, which contributed to a widespread change in medieval Europe after the twelfth century, when Arabic works started circulating in the Latin West. Typical scientific activities, such as experimentation and astronomical calculation, are the clearest instances of the impossible distinction between occult theories and orthodox natural philosophy. As a matter of fact, occult theories formed an integral part of the Western tradition, and that is the reason why the opinion expressed by a leading scholar, such as Edward Grant, according to whom ‘the astrological part is virtually devoid of relevance or utility for understanding medieval cosmology’ (50) is at least questionable. In any case, even if the impact of occultism in the Western world is vigorously debated, the Islamic influence on Western occult doctrines should deserve more consideration by historians of philosophy.

In the first part of the book, the author highlights the most relevant Arab theories about magic and heavenly influences. They joined Neoplatonic emanationism and Aristotelian causation in a view of a multi-level universe as a reflection of the divinity. The Neoplatonic and Aristotelian inspiration was due to some works, such as the *Liber De Causis*, a reinterpretation of Proclus’ *Elements of Theology*, and the so-called *Theology of Aristotle*, consisting of excerpts from Plotinus’ *Enneads*. As a result, the correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm, the participation of heavenly bodies in sublunar phenomena, and their function in the union of matter and form in natural species and qualities, can be deemed the distinctive features of Arabic occult doctrines. Despite the monotheistic character of Islam, occult theories were partially accepted in the Islamic milieu, as some Quranic verses reveal the divine significance of the positions of celestial bodies. Abu Ma’shar al Balkhi represents one of the first endeavors to consider astrology as part of natural philosophy, as he expressed a complete view of astral influences. Another relevant Arab thinker was Al-Kindi, nicknamed ‘the philosopher of the Arabs,’ held to be the first Islamic author to take into account Aristotle’s thought. He flourished in the age of the main translations of Greek texts in Arabic, and his philosophy assimilated both Neoplatonic and Aristotelian elements. In his *De Radiis*, astral rays are the agents through which vitalism is connected to astral causation. In another debated text, the *Picatrix*, a long eleventh century treatise dealing with talismanic operations and attributing a divine essence to the planetary bodies, all terrestrial things are dominated by celestial forms. In this appreciated magical book, the work of talismans reflects the influence exerted by the heavenly world. In the ‘Renaissance of the twelfth century,’ as it is usually called, the Arabic theories of celestial influence helped the birth of harmonic visions of the world. By the second half of the following century, Aristotle’s works, and their Arabic commentaries, were available in Latin translations. In that cultural context, Avicenna’s conception of heavenly causation contributed very much in including research about the celestial realm in metaphysics. In his worldview, the universe is dependent on the creative activity of the First Cause. The hierarchies of creatures emanate necessarily by the divine essence and the agent intellect shapes the sublunar world and human souls. However,

according to the Persian philosopher, 'rigid causality terminates in the natural world due to the terrestrial causes that may oppose the astral influences' (76).

The central section of the book deals with the occult conceptions of important Renaissance thinkers, such as Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and John Dee. The Neoplatonic and Hermetic astrological schools were revived by Ficino, a protagonist of the rediscovery of Platonic thought. Neoplatonic and Hermetic doctrines were not the only sources inspiring Ficino's philosophy. The early modern rebirth of magic and astrology was supported by a renewed attention to Arabic occult doctrines. Ficino can be deemed a classic Neoplatonic thinker. In his worldview, human mind worships the infinite divinity from which all reality emanates. Thus, occultism was part of this conciliation between religion and philosophy, aiming at a beatific vision of the divine wisdom as the goal of the soul's ascent. However, after the end of the fifteenth century, the publication of some relevant works, Abu Ma'shar's *Introduction* being one, greatly influenced philosophical reflection. That is why Arabic conceptions of astral influence found their place in typical syncretism of the Renaissance age. Their influence cannot be disregarded, and the role of Neoplatonism as the essence of Renaissance occultism is often overemphasized. The Neoplatonic arrangement absorbed the causality dating back to the medieval Aristotelian tradition. In Ficino's works, the causal role attributed to heavenly bodies derives from the most important Arabic texts. In his *Three Books on Life*, the incorporation of the emanative and causal approaches can be seen as a syncretic reconciliation of Neoplatonism and Arabic hylomorphism.

Before becoming an associate of Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola had studied Aristotelian philosophy and Kabbalah at the University of Padua. He was familiar with the main works of the astrological tradition, and his great erudition made him a typical representative of the Renaissance humanism. In his early works he declared his own belief in the heavenly influence on human events, but he refused the astrological determinism threatening free will. His *Disputations*, his most complete criticism of judicial astrology, became the most discussed book about astrology in the early modern age. In this work, written under the influence of the Dominican Gerolamo Savonarola, he rejected any attempt to connect human events with astrological prediction. The only kind of astrology approved by Pico consisted in what Savonarola called 'speculative astrology.' It 'investigates how the celestial bodies act as causes without predictive purposes' (139), and Pico's adoption of this kind of astrological doctrine is based on Arabic theories concerning heavenly bodies as efficient causes. Despite the difficulty in reconstructing natural magic in Pico's writings, the author highlights the relationship between his ideas and Arabic sources.

'With his popularization of mathematics, Dee contributed to a mathematical Renaissance' (151). Being the owner of one of the largest libraries of his time, this Elizabethan occult philosopher covered a wide range of arguments in his research. He translated ancient works, and, as a modern scientist, promoted mathematical knowledge in different fields, such as navigation and astronomy. Roger Bacon (1214-1292) was among the authors who inspired John Dee, and mathematics is not the only subject showing that influence. In his *Propaedeumata*, he dealt with astrological causation based upon the Baconian vision of the procession of rays as a multiplication of species. In *Monas Hieroglyphica*, the investigation of natural reality consists in a combination of magic, alchemy and astrology. Dee's production can be evaluated as another instance of the science-occultism interaction in the early modern age. Broadly speaking, Arabic texts contributed to the popularity of magic and astrology in Britain. More specifically, the influence exerted on Dee's astrological theories are due to the principle of heavenly bodies acting through motion, heat and light. So, science represents the demonstration that the terrestrial world depends on astral causality, and mathematics, as the foundation of magic and astrology, allows philosophers to investigate the divine wisdom.

In the final chapter, the author lays stress on how the Arabic doctrines shaped western views on celestial souls and demons, acting as immanent principles in the world.

The contents of this excellent work make it suitable for specialists of medieval philosophy of nature, and it will prove very helpful for acquiring a deeper knowledge in medieval and early modern occult theories. Some conclusions can be drawn from the arguments expressed in this publication. The influence exerted by Arabic thought on Western occultism can be considered as a clear proof of the impossibility of drawing a sharp distinction between medieval and modern natural philosophy. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, historians have unmistakably showed that science originated in the medieval Christian milieu. Despite the fact that Christianity rejected the idea of a pantheist universe, there would be little sense in oversimplifying the Islamic-Latin West cultural interaction. Although the scientific approach refuses any sort of magic and astrological views, occult theories contributed to spread the knowledge of mathematics, astronomical computation, alchemy and other related disciplines. In Kuhnian terms, one can state that the era of translation brought about the advent of a new paradigm, whose basic principles include Arabic thought as an integral part.

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