

**Peter Adamson, ed.** *Interpreting Avicenna. Critical Essays.* Cambridge University Press 2015. 314 pp. \$103.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780521190732); \$36.99 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781316505359).

Avicenna emerged as a towering figure in the Islamic milieu, so that it is possible to divide Arabic philosophy into the age before and after him. This collection of essays aims at examining the most important aspects of Avicenna's thought, including his reception in the medieval cultural context. The relevance of his philosophical production is unquestionable, although discussion on some essential points of his philosophy is still underway. Notwithstanding the tendentious character of his autobiography and the biographies written by his disciples, the reconstruction of Avicenna's life shows some relevant details. The Persian philosopher received a traditional education, even if his autodidacticism was not usual in the milieu in which he lived. His own self-training in logic became essential for his philosophical system and Avicenna's originality in that area of investigation is beyond question. The functioning of the human mind in syllogistic processes in an order including the middle terms is a clear instance of the originality of his vision, which supports logic as a science in itself and a fundamental instrument for other disciplines. Moreover, logic can be considered as a major field in his encyclopedic philosophy and the large number of post-Avicennian logicians represents a demonstration of the relevance of his contribution.

Avicenna flourished during the golden age of Islamic thought. From the beginning he demonstrated all his talent, as in the first years of his maturity he had already developed a coherent view of the world. However, the first steps of his career depended on the practical skills he offered. The Neoplatonic and Aristotelian influences led him to conceive knowledge as a structured whole, and the pedagogical dimension of his thought agreed with the trend. Dimitri Gutas, Professor of Arabic at Yale University, deals with Avicenna's philosophical project as aiming at achieving an account of all reality. His project implied the adoption of no less global ways to communicate that kind of universal knowledge; the different styles and registers of language he experimented with testify to the universality of his design. This distinctive feature of his philosophy leads Gutas to declare: 'more than most other indicators, this fact alone shows that Avicenna was the second philosopher after Aristotle to have as pronounced a sense of advancing philosophy to a qualitatively higher level and the corresponding need to communicate it broadly and systematically' (43). The final result of this philosophical arrangement consists in the compilation of eight *Summae*, among which the *Cure* is the most extensive, as its most important edition runs to twenty-two volumes. In sum, his own approach to philosophical communication was successful, as he managed to integrate the Greek philosophical tradition with Islamic culture.

Medicine certainly forms part of Avicenna's all-encompassing view, although its importance in his thought is controversial. Even if it occupies a low rung in his project, Avicenna devoted a lot of attention to the medical discipline, and the diffusion of his *Canon* in the following centuries promoted him as a protagonist in the history of medicine. The *Canon* is a sort of *summa*, arranged in a theoretical way, as he considered theoretical medicine more important than practice. However, the importance of experience is problematic, as Avicenna himself declared to have applied his own principles for a correct use of empirical practice. Other aspects clearly showing the modernity of his approach can be found in the function of the soul interacting with the brain, or the inclusion of his theory of the inner senses in medicine. It is easy to understand how, in that area of learning, he anticipated the modern and contemporary debates about the mind-body relationship.

An original point of view is expressed by Dag Nikolaus Hasse, Professor at Würzburg University, who tries to answer the following question: ‘is the intelligible abstracted by the soul or does it flow from the active intellect?’ (114). According to the author, the distinction between Aristotelian abstraction and Neoplatonic emanation as the key issue for understanding Avicenna’s view is not the right way to solve the problem. Avicenna upheld the view that the forms are emanated from the active intellect into the sublunary world; thus, abstraction and emanation don’t exclude each other. Whereas immaterial forms are grasped directly, material forms have to be abstracted from matter. In other words, essences exist as universals in the active intellect, and as particulars in the material world. The emanation of forms, which do not originate in the sublunary world, from the active intellect implies the fundamental role of the soul in grasping them. Abstraction is necessary for the first achievement of a form, and that activity allows the soul to possess the ability to render the form present in the mind. Just the disposition of acquiring universal forms causes the emanative process from the active intellect into the human soul. The merit of the author of this essay lies in rendering such a difficult theory accessible to readers, and one of his statements perfectly fits with Avicenna’s theory of knowledge: ‘the active intellect resembles an external hard disk, in the sense of an intellectual depository which delivers upon demand’ (119).

The metaphysical dimension of Avicenna’s philosophy is strictly connected with his theory of the divine. That is the subject discussed by Peter Adamson, Professor of Philosophy at King’s College London. According to Avicenna, God is a necessary existent in itself, although his demonstration shows the presence of a necessary existent, without identifying it with the divinity. That is why the Persian philosopher wants to show the existence of a series of divine attributes, among which *uniqueness* is the most pivotal, as something uncaused must be unique. Uniqueness is closely linked with simplicity, as a unique being cannot be divided in parts. Simplicity, in turn, implies ineffability and intellection, as thinking and self-thinking are distinctive features of the divine. Last but not least, goodness follows from the necessity of the First Cause and from the fact that God is a source of perfections for the universe. Those attributes are arranged in a global vision involving God’s will, ‘identical to His knowledge, emanation and generosity’ (188).

The last three chapters of this book are devoted to the reception of Avicenna in Islamic, Jewish and Christian contexts. His great impact on thinkers belonging to the three monotheistic religions, represents a further demonstration of his relevance as a philosopher. In fact, one cannot consider only Avicenna’s Arab followers, although he was little translated into Hebrew. Within the group of the Arabophone Jews influenced by Avicenna, Moses Maimonides deserves a special attention, for being considered the most influential Jewish author of all time. In fact, whenever in the *Guide for the Perplexed* Maimonides mentions Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, actually he has in mind the theories of Avicenna. That is typical of Maimonides and other Jewish scholars, who borrowed from Avicenna without attribution. In the Medieval milieu, Avicenna was soon replaced by Averroes, considered the author representing a true interpreter of Aristotle. As regards to Latin Medieval culture, Amos Bertolacci (Scuola Normale Superiore Pisa) lays stress on the fact that Avicenna’s works were part of the University curricula, and their impact continued past the Middle Ages. The reading of the *Canon*, for example, was still a common practice in the early Seventeenth Century courses of medicine. As a matter of fact, a detailed investigation of Avicenna’s influence in the Christian context is still lacking. Latin translations concerned natural philosophy and metaphysics for the most part, and that reflects the cultural trend of the Latin world, more interested in Avicenna’s worldview than in logic. Albertus Magnus’ Commentary on *Metaphysics* is the first great known work on that subject that ‘relies on Avicenna for doctrinal enrichment of Aristotle’s text’ (262).

Another reason for the difficulty of researching Avicenna's reception in the Latin world consists in the diffusion of Averroes's commentaries on the *Corpus Aristotelicum*. So, on one hand the idea of a clear distinction between Avicenna and Averroes on the main metaphysical questions spread among philosophers. On the other hand, some Latin authors tried to synthesize the thought of the two Islamic authors. The above mentioned Albertus Magnus, especially in his mature works, is a clear instance of that synthetic effort. At the end of his essay, Bertolacci highlights how the *media via* adopted by Albertus influenced a pivotal author such as Thomas Aquinas.

This book succeeds in presenting a detailed account of the main questions of Avicenna's thought. It can be considered suitable for scholars and also students with a basic understanding of medieval philosophy. A conclusion can be drawn from reading this overview of Avicenna's contribution. The importance of the Persian philosopher lies in the universality of his philosophical project, which includes all the most important areas of knowledge. Thus, given the dimensions of his production, much work still remains to be done in order to understand the deep influence he exerted on future generations of philosophers and scientists.

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