The Lamp of Mysteries: A Commentary on the Light Verse of the Quran (review)

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done a good job presenting them correctly; however, in one place (p. 67), the Hebrew letters are written in reverse order (דוסי for יוסד). In another place (p. 55), we have what is probably a holdover from an earlier publication: a reference to recently (“recentemente”) published works from 1983 and 1992. Yet these errors are small and do not detract from the value of the book.

Zonta’s great achievement in this work is his clear, simple presentation of essentially everything that is known about Averroes’ *Middle Commentary* on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* along with both translations of the work. By keeping his own metaphysical speculations out of the work, Zonta allows the reader the freedom to strive to understand Averroes’ text on terms that are as close as possible to its own.

Notes


3 – Formerly Jews’ College Library (London), no. 42; Magyar Tudományos Akadémia (Budapest), Kaufman collection A 284; and National Library of Israel (Jerusalem), ms. 4° 1108.

4 – Biblioteca Palatina (Parma), parmense 2613, and Biblioteca Ambrosiana (Milan), D 85 sup. (Bernheimer 73).

5 – Harvard University, Houghton Library, hebr. 41.


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We owe a debt of gratitude to Bilal Kuşpinar for his pioneering work on Ismā‘īl Anqarawī, this being the second book he has written on this important seventeenth-century Ottoman thinker. Anqarawī was very much within the Islamic mystical tradition and incorporated within his thought some interesting aspects of both _masḥīṣā‘ī_
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(Peripatetic) and ishraqi (Illuminationist) thought. This is an edition and translation of the Misbah al-Asrar, a commentary on the Light Verse in the Qur'ān that has so often been commented on, especially by those within the more mystical Islamic traditions, since its references to light are full of suggestive information for those who see light as a crucial philosophical notion. The thing about light is that it generally comes from somewhere outside us and makes what exists visible, and without light things cannot be seen. Light is, then, a condition of knowledge, and this applies not only to knowledge of matters of fact but also to higher forms of knowledge, which can also be said to be illuminated from outside. Here the illumination is not on our senses but on our intellect, and again the idea of something bringing out what already exists is suggestive, especially for mystics, since for them how the world really is can be appreciated through a variation in our cogitative orientation, as though the world suddenly looks to have a particular character, rather like seeing things in a room when the light is turned on.

What makes the discussion so complex, in a sense, is the mixture of philosophical methodologies used by Anqarawī, including those of Rūmī, Ibn 'Arabī, and al-Suhrawardi, not to mention al-Ghazzālī, all of whom saw the issue from a different perspective, but they are not difficult to bring into agreement with each other either. God wants to be known, and so is equivalent to the lamp, but he is so far beyond us that this knowledge is really not possible except by indirect and subtle means. Still, God and his final prophet Muhammad can be linked with the source of light, the lamp, while we are the niche that is lit up, if we merit it and if we prepare ourselves appropriately to receive the light. It might be thought that light is a poor analogy, since it shines where it will and illuminates its object regardless of whether the object is prepared to receive it, but actually it is a useful metaphor since really unless its object is capable of receiving light it will not, and it is not difficult to move from this idea to that of the human soul being prepared to receive what is available to it. Of course, it is for God to decide whether to send the light; it is not an automatic process, as it is for the Peripatetic thinkers who see the active intellect as the conduit of knowledge and something that quite automatically connects with the higher forms of reasoning that are available to it. For Anqarawī that is certainly not the case, since God is far more directly the cause of light and personally decides who should receive it or otherwise, and his basis for choice is no doubt linked with the deserts, moral as well as intellectual, of the searcher after knowledge.

Anqarawī’s methodology is synthetic rather than analytic. He uses a mixture of philosophical techniques in combination with verses from the Qur’ān and the prophetic traditions to throw light—as I cannot help writing—on the topic. This short book is a sustained investigation of those scriptural passages and prophetic sayings that enter into a dialogue with the philosophical ideas marshalled by the author. It is an impressive product, concise on the one hand yet concentrated, and nicely argued throughout. Although Anqarawī is not averse to referring to mystery as lying at the heart of the topic, since mystery lies at the heart of our relationship to God, he does not use this as an alibi to avoid trying to understand the topic insofar as human beings can grasp the truth on matters as elevated as this. Right at the end of the book there is a nice discussion of how knowledge is to be classified, given the notion that
was widely accepted throughout Islamic philosophy that in knowledge the knower, the object of knowledge, and the act of knowing are equivalent to each other. This cannot be literally true since if we are trying to know God, we cannot be said to be the same as Him, or even in contact with Him, so huge is the difference between us and the divine. On the other hand, as Anqarawi says, in a sense we are all part of the unity of creation, and what we know is equivalent to us as knowers and to the acts of knowing also. Here he abruptly closes the discussion, since this has proved to be dangerous territory for Sufism, with its tendency to wander between a transcendent and immanent conception of God.

This very helpful book is an important contribution to our understanding of a significant thinker and a period of thought that is not nearly as well known as it should be. The text that Kuspınar establishes seems sensible to me and his editing decisions plausible also. It is very good to have the original text included with the translation, but a shame that they could not have been printed on facing pages. The technical apparatus, such as the account of the various manuscripts and the indexes, are helpful, although I would have welcomed an index of Qur’anic passages and hadīth (sayings of the Prophet) also. But this is a short book and so it is not difficult to find one’s way around the text. All in all, this is an impressive and well-produced book that could easily be used in courses on Sufism with students who have some grasp of Arabic. For those who do not, it will no doubt inspire them to acquire it!


Reviewed by Laura Specker Sullivan University of Hawai‘i laura.specker@gmail.com

Ethics Embodied: Rethinking Selfhood through Continental, Japanese, and Feminist Philosophies by Erin McCarthy is a concise, clear beginning to a discussion that has recently been gaining interest: comparative feminist philosophy. In this book McCarthy ably lays much of the groundwork necessary for such a discussion and also makes a good argument for its importance. On McCarthy’s account, comparative feminist philosophy, and ethics in particular, fills problematic holes in the dominant Western (and arguably masculine) ethical framework. These holes are highlighted by the framework’s difficulty accounting for subjects and situations in which embodiment, the emotions, and interpersonal relationships play a primary role. That is to say, by overly emphasizing public verifiability, detached knowledge, and external relationships, the dominant ethical framework has missed the significance of personal objectivity, affective knowledge, and intimate relationships. McCarthy’s introduction of comparative feminist ethics is not intended to usurp this dominant framework, but to highlight its insufficiencies and offer a complementary perspective.