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Book Review

Krause, Katja & Richard C. Taylor (Eds.), *Albert the Great and his Arabic Sources: Medieval Science between Inheritance and Emergence*[1]

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The average public perception often equates German philosophy with the rationalists like Leibniz and Wolff; the pioneers of the Romantic movement like Schleiermacher, Herder, and Schelling; the exponents of Enlightenment like Kant, Fichte, and Hegel; and the counter Enlightenment thinkers like Marx and Nietzsche. Readers' modern bias induces them to treat German philosophy as a progeny of modernity to the exclusion of such outliers like Angelus Silesius and the other great pre-modern German masters like Meister Eckhart, Hildegard of Bingen, Nicholas of Cusa, and the subject matter of book under review, Albert the Great. To many, Albert the Great (despite the attribution of greatness) is but a medieval figure and a second fiddle at that to his more celebrated Italian student, Thomas Aquinas. What is often kept from popular view is Albert's immense contribution not just to the development of Catholic medieval thought but more so, to the early formation of German intellectual culture. This gross neglect has since been corrected by earlier and more recent works of scholars like Lewis White Beck,[2] John Marenbon,[3] Stanley Cunningham,[4] and Irven M.

[1] Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2024, 477pp.

[2] See Lewis White Beck, *Early German Philosophy: Kant and His Predecessors* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969).

[3] See John Marenbon, *Medieval Philosophy: An Historical and Philosophical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2007).

[4] See Stanley B. Cunningham, *Reclaiming Moral Agency: The Moral Philosophy of Albert the Great* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

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Resnick.[5] The text at hand is a testament to a growing interest on Albert's intellectual patrimony to German thought and beyond.

The book titled *Albert the Great and his Arabic Sources: Medieval Science between Inheritance and Emergence* is a collection of thirteen pieces dedicated to an assortment of themes that feature Albert's engagement of his Arabic Aristotelian sources within the decades of the 1240s up to the late 1260s. This was the peak of Albert's academic productivity which counted among its fruits the treatise *Summa Creaturis*, specifically the part *De Homine* (1242); his commentaries on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Super Ethica* (1249-52), *Physics* (1251) as well as *Politics* (1264); his commentary on the pseudo-Aristotelian text, *Book on the Causes of the Properties of the Elements* (1251-1254); his commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences* (1246-49); and his commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius' *De Divinis Nominibus* (1250). What made the writings doubly remarkable was the fact that they were composed while Albert himself was deeply immersed in his various assignments across places such as Paris, Cologne, Worms, Agnani, Regensburg, Viterbo, Orvieto, Würzburg, and Strasbourg.[6] Albert's access to and extensive use of the Arabic materials are consequences of a significant historical and cultural turning point.[7] As one may remember, the thirteenth-century is the specific juncture when the newly established European universities were inundated with new translations of Aristotelian texts, including commentaries and editions from Arabic scholars which included key names such as Alfraganus (al-Farghānī, d. after 861 ce), Alkindus/Alkindi (al-Kindī, d. 873), Iohannitius (Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq, d. 873), Constabulus (Qusṭā ibn Lūqā, d. 912), Albategnius (al-Battānī, d. 929), Ysaac Iudaeus (Isḥāq ibn Sulaymān al-Isrāʾīlī, d. c. 955), Alfarabius/Alfarabi (al-Fārābī, d. 970), Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā, d. 1037), Avicebron (Ibn Gabirol, d. 1058), Algazel (al-Ghazālī, d. 1111), Avempace (Ibn Bājja, d. 1138), Alpetragius (al-Biṭrūjī, fl. 1185–92), Averroes (Ibn Rushd, d. 1198), Rabbi Moyses (Maimonides, Mūsā ibn Maymūn, d. 1204), and the then unknown author of *Liber de Causis*.[8] Besides metaphysics, ethics, alchemy and natural science,

[5] See Irven M. Resnick (Ed.), *A Companion to Albert the Great: Theology, Philosophy, and the Sciences (*Boston: Brill, 2013); Irven M. Resnick and Kenneth F. Kitchell, Jr., *Albertus Magnus and the World of Nature* (London: Reaktion Books, 2022).

[6] See Katja Krause and Richard C. Taylor (Eds.), *Albert the Great and his Arabic Sources: Medieval Science between Inheritance and Emergence* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2024), 12.

[7] See *Ibid*., 43.

[8] The authorship of *Liber de Causis* has been a subject matter of chronic disputes. In the thirteenth century however, Thomas Aquinas, through some textual sleuthing of his own, discovered evidence of plagiarism in the said treatise. Apparently, certain lines of *Liber de Causis* proved to be extracts from an earlier work, the *Elements of Theology,* by the Neoplatonist thinker, Proclus. See Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Book of Causes*, trans. by Vincent A. Guagliardo, O.P., Charles R. Hess, O.P., and Richard C. Taylor (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), xiii–xiv.

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Albert also relied on the aforementioned Arabic authors for his researches on astronomy, medicine and mathematics. Of the scholars cited, Albert showed closer dependence on Alfarabi, Algazel, Avempace, Maimonides,[9] and most importantly, Avicenna and Averroes. Avicenna, according to Irven M. Resnick, was the philosopher "… writing in Arabic that Albert most admired and most often cited."[10] Averroes, on the other hand, in Luis Xavier Lopez-Farjeat's account, was the authority behind Albert's initial notion of the unicity of the human soul.[11] It would later be inherited and developed more fully by Aquinas who was one of Albert's students in Cologne.[12] Albert's following of Avicenna and Averroes is put in full display in the book. In fact, except for Chapters 1 and 13 (which serve as the bookends of the text), the rest of the chapters showcase Albert's Avicennian and Averroist inheritance in the realms of metaphysics (Chapters 2 and 12), philosophical anthropology (Chapter 3), ethics (Chapter 4), physics (Chapter 5), natural history (Chapter 6), natural philosophy (Chapters 7 and 11), epistemology (Chapter 8), and psychology (Chapters 9 and 10).

Even during his lifetime, Albert already enjoyed the accolade, "the Great," on account of the expanse and enormity of his intellectual prowess. In his studies, he attempted to cover every recognized domain of knowledge in the hope of bringing them into a synthesis and most importantly, orienting them beyond their "particular epistemic concerns."[13] As explained by Katja Krause: "This epistemic purpose was one that Albert himself identified as crucial to his overarching science and that is very familiar to scholarship: the combination of truth with certainty and epistemic comprehensiveness to the extent that these can be achieved through the intellectual practices of defining and explaining."[14] Albert's fundamental partiality towards knowledge draws from his Aristotelian anthropological worldview: "*homo inquantum homo solus intellectus*."[15] Harnessing knowledge and enabling the human person, not just to know, but to know reality as one organic whole is what, according to Albert, would lead the human knower to full flourishing. In the words of

[9] Arabic in this sense is taken as a linguistic, not a religious, reference. Maimonides and Avicebron, though Jewish scholars, were counted among Albert's Arabic sources because the language they used in their works was Arabic, the lingua franca in southern Spain from where the two originated. See Charles Manekin ed., *Medieval Jewish Philosophical Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xvi; Jorger J.E. Garcia and Noone, Timothy N. ed., *A Companion to Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell Publisjing Ltd., 2002), 174–181.

[10] Krause and Taylor, *Albert the Great and his Arabic Sources*, 168.

[11] See *Ibid*., 226.

[12] See Thomas Aquinas, "On the Uniqueness of Intellect Against Averroists," <https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/DeUnitateIntellectus.htm>.

[13] Krause and Taylor, *Albert the Great and his Arabic Sources*, 312.

[14] *Ibid*., 313.

[15] *Ibid*., 13.

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Henryk Anzulewicz: "On Albert's view, the true, natural, and essential fulfilment of human life has the good of the intellect alone as its goal; human fulfilment lies in contemplative happiness (*felicitas contemplativa*), which consists in intellectual activity undertaken for its own sake."[16]

Albert's aspiration for an epistemic synthesis directly coincided with his quest to secure the integrity of philosophy as an autonomous *scientia.* During Albert's time, the problem concerning the scientific status of philosophy was at the center of the debates between the masters of theology and the masters of the arts of the University of Paris. Between the theologians' view (drawn from the Augustinian tradition) of philosophy as subordinate to theology and the arts professors' (swayed by Latin Averroism) insistence on philosophy's radical independence, Albert proposed a third path, that is, an idea of philosophy which retains its distinction from theology without precluding the possibility of some form of theoretical interface. The same intellectual stance rubbed off on his young apprentice and fellow friar, Thomas Aquinas. Both Albert and Thomas recognized the need to assert philosophy's autonomy. They upheld and argued for the same when they served together as members of an advisory commission for intellectual life that the Dominicans' Master General Humbert of Romans assembled for the provincial chapter held at Valenciennes, France in 1259.[17] Traces of this distinct Albertine philosophic proclivity could be found in the aforementioned *Summa de Creaturis*, specifically the part dealing with anthropology (called *De Homine*) and his commentaries on Aristotle's *Ethica Nicomachea*, *Super Ethica* as well as *Politics*. Albert takes philosophy as a human science hence his special interest on human subjectivity.[18] While openly receptive to Aristotle, Albert nonetheless did not hide his allegiance to Neoplatonism as mediated by Pseudo-Dionysius. This was evidenced most clearly by his priority for non-discursive mode of knowing over any other way of obtaining knowledge. With Pseudo-Dionysius, he asserted that the human capacity for scientific knowledge can be located neither in discursive reason nor free will but in "intuitive insight." As Henryk Anzulewicz made clear: "Closer examination of Albert's early statements about human nature shows that he grounds the human aptitude for science neither in discursive reason (*intellectus compositivus* or *ratio*) nor in free will (*liberum arbitrium*), but rather in intuitive insight (*intellectus simplex*). Nevertheless, Albert assigns the leading role in the cognitive process to reason and will, with their natural, specific, and individual properties. Reason and will, together with the human

[16] *Ibid*., 290.

[17] See Simon Tugwell, O.P., *Albert & Thomas: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 15 and James A. Weisheipl, O.P., *Friar Thomas D'Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Works* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1983), 138.

[18] See Krause and Taylor, *Albert the Great and his Arabic Sources*, Chapters 8–10.

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natural desire for knowledge, constitute an epigenetic predisposition that makes human beings capable of scientific knowing."[19]

To make sense then of the complex texture of Albert's overall philosophic project, readers must be attentive to the Aristotelian and Pseudo-Dionysian elements of his various texts. Via Pseudo-Dionysius, he accounted for the scientific status of theology by distinguishing between its two modalities, namely *scientia affectiva* and *scientia mystica*;[20] via the Arabic sources, he provided philosophy legitimate grounding outside the foundation of theology. The latter, with its best specimen in his commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, represents a way of approaching God within the limits of human reason; the former, embodied by his treatises on the works of Pseudo-Dionysius, demonstrates a pathway to knowing God beyond the norms of human cognition. Needless to say, Albert's interpretation of the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus happily blended with his reading of the works of both Avicenna and Averroes. His works between 1248-1252, that is, the time he spent in Cologne, bore witness to this intersecting hermeneutic approach. As the designated master of the newly established Dominican *studium generale* in Germany, Albert's primary task was to mentor select friars sent to Cologne for his tutelage. Part of his curricular repertoire was a presentation of a metaphysics of creation based on Avicenna and an experimental exposition of Pseudo-Dionysius' treatise on divine names. Recalling Albert's stint in Cologne, Richard Taylor wrote: "There, Albert made the unusual decision to begin by commenting on the works of Pseudo-Dionysius. In his commentary to *On the Divine Names*, he demonstrated particularly well for Thomas and his other students the value of using the *Metaphysics* of Avicenna and the *Liber de causis* from the Arabic tradition, as well as writings by Boethius, Anselm, and others from the Latin tradition, to explain the metaphysics both of creation and of being as a divine name in the writings of Dionysius. In his commentary on Dionysius's *On the Divine Names*, Albert also discussed issues in philosophical psychology and even set out a brief account of monopsychism that was based largely on the philosopher 'Averroes'—albeit without explicitly mentioning the name of his source."[21]

Albert's attempt to re-introduce philosophy as an autonomous science was no arbitrary decision. It was a pursuit born out of Albert's venture to supply theology's own need for a scientific infrastructure.[22] The initiative, so to speak, was a philosophic enterprise prompted by a theological goal. From distinguishing conventional revealed theology from mystical

[19] *Ibid*., 285.
[20] See *Ibid*., 19.
[21] *Ibid*., 70.
[22] See *Ibid*., 19.

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theology, Albert eventually segued to demarcating philosophy from theology itself. In both endeavors, Albert showed his indebtedness to and deviation from his Arabic sources. Though he did strive to stay as close as possible to the Arabic masters, his oeuvre cannot be considered a mere replica of theirs but a showcase of his critical reading of his Islamic and Jewish counterparts. The Arabic scholars did show him the way, but he was entirely on his own in charting a new direction for philosophic and theological thinking. Though underrated, Albert's imprint on German philosophy in particular and Western thought in general is one no serious scholar can afford to ignore.

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