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Peter Coates. Ibn 'Arabi and Modern Thought:
The History of Taking Metaphysics Seriously.
Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 2002. Pp. 203.

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Peter Coates. *Ibn 'Arabi and Modern Thought: The History of Taking Metaphysics Seriously*. Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 2002. Pp. 203.

[1] Muhiyuddin Ibn Arabi (d.1240) stands as one of the towering intellectual figures in Islamic history. James Morris of the University of Exeter insightfully noted that, “paraphrasing Whitehead’s famous remark about Plato - and with something of the same degree of exaggeration - one could say that the history of Islamic thought subsequent to Ibn Arabi [ . . . ] might largely be construed as a series of footnotes to his work.” (“Ibn Arabi and his Interpreters,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* [1986] 752). Yet despite Ibn Arabi’s undisputable role in charting the trajectory of post thirteenth century Islamic thought, most Western scholars of Islam shied away from seriously studying the writings of this Spanish mystic until about 50 years ago. The problem lay not in the insignificance but terrible ambiguity of his writings. Even the late Orientalist Reynold Nicholson, despite his well-acknowledged linguistic and exegetical mastery of classical sufi literature, refrained from publishing his translation of Ibn Arabi’s magnum opus, the *Bezels of Wisdom*, because of uncertainties he harboured about the accuracy of his finished work. His student, A. E. Affifi, author of *The Mystical Philosophy of Muiyiddin Ibnul Arabi*, the first complete English monograph on him, also later conceded he had not fully understood the thought of Islam’s *doctor maximus*.

[2] The last twenty years has witnessed a resurgence of interest in the field of Ibn Arabi studies. Thanks, in large part, to the pioneering work of Michel Chodkiewicz and William Chittick, not to mention other important scholars, the architectural landscape of Ibn Arabi’s worldview has become much clearer. There is such a wide range of excellent secondary literature available today on him that one can acquire a fairly accurate conception of his worldview relying solely on Western scholarship - to the extent possible for one not proficient in Arabic, as Ibn Arabi’s ideas are intricately tied to subtle nuances of the language.

[3] What exactly is it about Ibn Arabi that might explain the recent flurry of literature exploring both the historical figure and his thought? To suggest that such research is motivated simply by the desire to fill a lacuna in Islamic studies would only be partially accurate. As readers of Ibn Arabi from a variety of disciplines have frequently observed, much of what this medieval mystic wrote speaks directly to the concerns of our age, and it is no doubt this characteristic that has given him such a wide and growing readership today which extends beyond Islamic studies specialists.

[4] Peter Coates’s work is the first English study to explore the relevance of Ibn Arabi’s thought to contemporary theoretical concerns in the areas of philosophy, psychology, and sociology. Although Coates’s formal training has been in psychology and philosophy, which he taught until his retirement at the University of Lincoln, he has been an avid reader of Ibn Arabi for the last twenty years, relying on the research of Ibn Arabi specialists. His own academic background has allowed him to investigate the pertinence of the mystic’s ideas to areas that Ibn Arabi specialists would not usually be in a position to treat. By utilizing their writings, he is able to draw out some remarkable intersections between the mystic’s worldview and key modern thinkers ranging from Nietzsche to Weber.

[5] The single most appealing quality of Ibn Arabi’s metaphysics, for Coates, seems to be its acceptance of multiple truths, or the view that reality reveals itself in diverse modes to different people, and that these diverse revelations are all authentic in their own ways. For Ibn Arabi this epistemological perspective is

rooted in an ontology in which only God truly exists. The universe is God's self-disclosure (*tajalli*), being in and of itself non-existent, very much like an empty mirror. Every particular belief is based on one among many ways of encountering the world, or more precisely, God's multiple self-revelations, which in turn give the cosmos its very existence (*wujud*). This relativistic epistemology is one of the most controversial features of Ibn Arabi's thought, one that set it apart not only from Muslim "orthodoxy" but also the mainstream sufi tradition. It was this particular understanding of God and the nature of human belief that led him, in the *Bezels of Wisdom*, to caution the spiritual aspirant against becoming bound to a particular belief thereby denying the legitimacy of others, "lest great good escape you." It also led him to boldly declare in Tarjuman al-Ashwaq, *The Interpreter of Desires* (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 2003, 43):

My heart has become capable of all forms!  
It is a cloister for monks, a temple for idols,  
A tablet for the Torah, a Kaba for the pilgrim!

[6] For Coates this epistemological pluralism speaks to those of us in the twenty-first century troubled by overarching, exclusivist meta-narratives. Because this perspectivism encourages seeing the world through as many angles as possible for a more holistic vision of existence, it comes, in some ways, very close to Nietzsche, whose words from the *Genealogy of Morals* 3:12 Coates cites: "the more eyes, *different* eyes, we can use to observe one thing the more complete . . . our 'concept' of this thing" (23). Unlike Nietzsche and other anti-metaphysical Western relativists, Ibn Arabi did believe in the possibility of actual knowledge of the whole of existence as a whole - the proper domain of metaphysics - not, however, through ratiocination but the organ of the Heart. This allowed him, paradoxically, to argue for both a relativism that accepted all beliefs, and for the existence of an accessible ultimate epistemological and ontological ground upon which all such beliefs are based. For the Muslim mystic, all beliefs have validity not because, as post-modernists might contend, they lack an ultimate ground, but because the nature of that ground creates a plethora of perspectives. Coates suggests we take this view seriously because it offers a way out of the deadlock created by a nihilistic, groundless relativism. Many modern thinkers would frown upon the suggestion we take mystical perception seriously, and certainly, for Ibn Arabi this ultimate ground is only "mystically" accessible, however Coates recommends considering this alternative because of the all-too-obvious limitations of rationality that the history of philosophy bears witness to beginning particularly with Kant. Ibn Arabi, observes Coates, would wholeheartedly agree with the German philosopher, and against his own medieval philosophical contemporaries, among them Averroes, in that there are boundaries beyond which reason cannot transgress. But he would also advocate - and Coates is again in full agreement - the need to rise beyond the intellectually self-defeating and somewhat hubris-laden Kantian view according to which "what we cannot know through human reason, we cannot know" (44).

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