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Cover

Mašhad, Kitābhāna-i Āsitān-i Quds-i Raḡawī 300, f. 1v
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, *grec* 1853, f. 186v

M. Zonta, *Saggio di lessicografia araba medievale*, Paideia, Brescia 2014 (Philosophica. Testi e studi, 7), pp. 329

In this book Mauro Zonta addresses the question of the history of Arabic medieval philosophical terminology. He narrows his focus on 37 key terms that go from physics and metaphysics (cause, being, accident, actuality, form, element, matter, body...) to logic (definition, difference, demonstration, genus...) and psychology (soul, intellect). The aim of the book is to prove that the Arabic-Islamic philosophical terminology is to a large extent older than and independent of the translations from Greek into Arabic.

A number of important studies has been devoted to the history of Arabic medieval philosophical terminology, treating it mainly, or even exclusively, as part of the legacy of classical Greek thought.¹ As stated in the preface (pp. 9-10), this book aims at overcoming most of their results. Although Zonta recognizes that their approach is perfectly legitimate, he argues that the study of Arabic-Islamic medieval philosophical terminology will decidedly benefit from the analysis of the influence of Pre-Islamic Persian, Indian, and, in general, Oriental languages. Zonta sets for himself the task of exploring the “possibile influenza esercitata sulla terminologia filosofica araba medievale da parte di quella proveniente dall’area persiana preislamica, centroasiatica e persino indiana” (p. 9).

According to Zonta, this comparative survey offers a new opportunity to reconstruct the history of Islamic philosophical terminology, and should be pursued through “un dettagliato confronto con la terminologia filosofica non solo delle altre lingue di cultura del Vicino Oriente, che furono in rapporti piú o meno stretti sia con il mondo greco, sia con il mondo arabo, ma anche con quella delle lingue dei popoli dell’area asiatica, con i quali l’islam, specialmente nel corso dell’VIII sec., potrebbe in realtà essere stato in relazioni anche culturali ben maggiori di quanto siano state generalmente riconosciute dagli studiosi” (pp. 14-15).

The span of time covered in this book goes from the 1st to the 16th century AD.² The languages taken into consideration (listed at pp. 16-20) are both Semitic (*Ge’ez* or classical Ethiopian, Syriac, Mandaean, classical Arabic) and non-Semitic (ancient Greek, Latin, classical Armenian, classical Georgian, Coptic, ancient Nubian, ancient and Middle Persian, Parthian, Chorasmian, Sogdian, Tocharian, Sanskrit, ancient Turkish, ancient Uyghur, Chagatai, Turkish kipciack, classic Tibetan, early medieval Chinese, and Mongolian). The author does not include in his analysis medieval Hebrew philosophical terminology, perhaps on a chronological basis, given that his aim is to explore the influence of the languages listed above on the formation of Arabic philosophical terminology. However, it would have been interesting to take into account, together with the terminology of *falsafa*, also that of the literary and scientific texts produced by Jewish authors from Muslim lands, as well as that of the Jewish *kalām* coeval with *falsafa*.

¹ Several of these studies are listed in the “Bibliografia generale” (pp. 21-33, part. at pp. 21-23), a few others are discussed by the author in footnotes; most examples are taken from the research conducted by Henri Hugonnard-Roche on the Syriac antecedents of Arabic logical terms, and from the landmark studies of Gerhard Endress as for the *Greek-Arabic lexicon*.

² Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 289: “L’opera di analisi storico-linguistica comparata che è stata tentata in questo libro riguarda un gruppo di trentasette concetti filosofici presenti, sia pure in forme e in modi talora molto diversi e non sempre perfettamente coincidenti nel significato, in una serie di lingue di cultura attive in un ampio spazio cronologico e geografico: molto approssimativamente, il primo millennio dopo Cristo, in uno spazio che copre l’area di imperi come quello romano in Oriente e in Occidente, quello persiano di epoca partica e sassanide, i califfati arabo-islamici, l’Etiopia e i regni altomedievali dell’Asia centrale come quello sogdiano, l’India, il Tibet e la Cina”.

As I have said, the point of this book is to establish that Arabic philosophical terminology is the result of combined influences exerted upon the Arabic language and culture not only by the Greek works translated, but also by languages and literatures from Central Asia and India. Zonta wonders “se ... il significato filosofico del termine arabo possa essere stato frutto di un’influenza esterna al mondo arabo e che possa eventualmente provenire dall’area linguistica dell’Asia centrale, o persino da quella indiana” (p. 40). The analysis of the selected key terms mentioned above is meant to substantiate this claim, and in the conclusive chapter (“La terminologia filosofica araba medievale: un ponte tra Oriente e Occidente”, pp. 289-97) he argues that Arabic philosophical terminology does not exhibit any specific dependence on Greek philosophical terminology.³ This conclusion is based on the fact that the loan words are few.⁴ Zonta acknowledges that the Syriac translations of Greek scientific and philosophical literature of the 6th-8th cent. influenced at least part of Arabic-philosophical terminology,⁵ but points also to Persian and Sanskrit,⁶ and urges to explore the influence of Oriental languages, including Chinese and Tibetan.⁷ According to him, from its formative period onwards the *falsafa* had recourse to a philosophical terminology that had already become part of the Arabic language due to contact between the Arabic-Islamic culture and the “altre lingue del Vicino Oriente, che furono in rapporti più o meno stretti sia con il mondo greco, sia con il mondo arabo, ma anche con quella delle lingue dei popoli dell’area asiatica” (pp. 14-15). This, in the author’s eyes, paves the way to a new approach to the history of Arabic philosophical terminology, different from that which has gained a firm footing in scholarship and is mirrored in fundamental works like the *Greek and Arabic Lexicon*.⁸ This is quite an ambitious project whose feasibility is difficult to evaluate taken as a whole, but whose woof and warp entails, in my opinion, some problematic questions.

My first problem is that this book does not raise the question of the steps of the alleged contacts of Arabic-Islamic philosophy and Oriental thought. One wonders when, and what sort of philosophical texts (especially Indian, Chinese, and Tibetan) would have become known, and

³ “Una prima ipotesi sembra che possa essere avanzata con molta evidenza: la terminologia filosofica araba medievale non è stata il frutto di una mera e diretta trasmissione linguistica della terminologia filosofica greca” (p. 289).

⁴ “Il confronto qui compiuto è giunto a individuare, su un totale di più di quaranta vocaboli propri della filosofia araba medievale, solo quattro termini di evidente dipendenza fonetico-morfologica da identici termini filosofici greci: *uṣṭuqas* (n. 13), *ḡīns* (n. 18), *hayūlā* (n. 21), *salḡasa* (n. 35)” [*sic*. The Arabic term discussed at no. 35 is *qiyās*, the usual rendering of συλλογισμός]. To this list one should obviously add at least *falsafa/faylasūf*. One may also remark that if the criterion for influence is the presence of loan words, this applies also to the other languages with which the Arabic philosophical terminology is compared: loan words from Chinese will predictably result even less numerous.

⁵ Zonta mentions “[...] l’indubbia influenza esercitata dalla terminologia filosofica siriana altomedievale (V-VIII sec.) su quella araba (*ibid.* p. 290).

⁶ Zonta’s point is that “la terminologia filosofica araba sia stata influenzata non solo da quella greca (evidentemente attraverso la mediazione del siriano), ma anche, e in modo tutt’altro che secondario, da quella delle lingue iraniche e, direttamente o indirettamente, dalla lingua propria della cultura indiana: il sanscrito” (p. 291).

⁷ “[...] “un ulteriore e più ampio quadro storico, incentrato su uno scambio di prestiti nell’ambito della terminologia filosofica tra le diverse lingue del Vicino, Medio e anche Estremo Oriente, avvenuto nel periodo altomedievale in questione” (*ibid.* p. 292).

⁸ “[...] la terminologia filosofica araba medievale non è stata il frutto di una mera e diretta trasmissione linguistica della terminologia filosofica greca. Benché il preziosissimo lavoro di Gerhard Endress e Dimitri Gutas presenti con molta cura l’impiego di un’amplissima gamma di concetti e vocaboli compiuto nelle traduzioni arabe dei testi filosofici e scientifici greci, realizzate forse in massima parte a Bagdad tra il 750 e il 1000 circa, tentando una sostanzialmente precisa corrispondenza tra i singoli termini greci e i loro corrispondenti arabi, sembra che proprio da questo tentativo di corrispondenza emergano in realtà parecchi elementi di differenza e discontinuità” (p. 289).

to whom among Arabic writers. Also, the book does not explore how the terminological transfer, which was the possible outcome of contacts and exchanges between people, did become part and parcel of Arabic philosophical terminology. The comparative lexicographical analysis does not take into account this kind of question, and this might well be the right thing to do, given the predictable lack of documentation. But this is precisely the point: the reader feels he has no way to pass judgment on the terminological comparisons proposed, since no indication is offered that one or other author writing in Arabic was acquainted, directly or indirectly, with the texts from which the terminological examples are taken – for instance the *Mahāvvyutpatti*, a Buddhist dictionary of the 9th century that occurs quite often in this book as a source for terminological comparisons.

Other problems arise in the analysis of the Arabic adaptations of the philosophical terminology. For instance, in the treatment of the term ἀίτια, *causa*, ‘illa/sabab’ (pp. 71-76) a survey is presented of the words that express the notion of ‘causal principle’ in an extremely wide range of languages and religious-philosophical literatures. Now, the meaning of the Greek ἀίτια is exemplified with reference to Aristotle’s *Categories* and *Metaphysics*; when the Arabic terms ‘illa and sabab are taken into account, Zonta remarks that ‘illa occurs in the 9th century translations of the *Metaphysics*. No information is given however about works issued from other philosophical traditions that possibly convey a notion of ‘cause’ different from the Aristotelian one, and whose impact on the Arabic philosophical terminology was possibly relevant, if the issue at hand is the formation of a philosophical vocabulary proper to the Arabic-speaking authors.⁹

In the Middle Ages the Greek philosophical and scientific corpus, inherited from late Hellenism, was translated from Greek and Syriac into Arabic, and became part of an organized set of knowledge gathering together, at least ideally, the Aristotelian logics, physics and ethics, the Neoplatonic metaphysics, Plato’s ethics and political thought, the Ptolemaic astronomy, the Euclidean geometry, and Galen’s medical works within the main frame of the ‘Aristotelian Neoplatonism’. As a consequence, the Arabic-Islamic authors adapted the Greek theoretical concepts as well as the Greek philosophical terminology. The influence of Greek philosophical literature is admittedly pervasive since the formative period of *falsafa*, and Zonta has extensively published on this; but this process does not play any real role in this book, and the reader who approaches it without a background knowledge risks to get lost.

True, the book does not address the question of the contents, so to speak, of Arabic-Islamic philosophy, rather it deals with the words it is made of. Perhaps the best example of what Zonta intends to do is his treatment of the word ‘adam, that in the Graeco-Arabic translations renders

⁹ Other examples of this kind of survey of the meaning of the terms are the following: “Il termine greco στοιχεῖον ha diversi significati: alcuni di essi riguardano l’ambito astronomico o linguistico, e non toccano quindi il concetto in questione. Il significato filosofico, corrispondente a quello di ‘elemento’, appare forse per la prima volta in Senofonte (prima metà del IV sec. a.C.), è poi presente in molti passi di Platone e assume definitivamente un ruolo chiave in Aristotele, che ne fa oggetto del suo dizionario filosofico” (p. 121). Also: “Anche se il termine δύναμις si ritrova fin dalle origini nella letteratura greca antica, da Omero in poi, sembra che la sua prima occorrenza, in ambito filosofico, come ‘potenza’ (nel senso di ‘potenzialità’) opposta all’ ‘atto’ si trovi per la prima volta in Aristotele, che ne fa oggetto di una voce specifica nel suo dizionario filosofico [reference is given to *Metaph.* Δ 12, 1019a, I 5 ss], e lo impiega nel suo sistema logico [reference is given to *De Int.*, I 3, 23a ss], con una contrapposizione concettuale che è presente anche nella patristica greca [reference is given to Origen, *In Ioannis Evangelium*, 2,24]” (p. 214 and n. 1-3). In the entry on “Esistenza (οὐσία/ὑπαρξίς *existentia*, *wu ġūd*)”, the meaning of this term “nella letteratura greca di epoca cristiana e altomedievale” is taken into account, but no reference is found to Greek philosophical works (p. 127ss).

στέρησις (n. 28, pp. 227-31). After having listed the words that express the notion of loss, imperfection, void etc. in an impressively wide range of languages, he claims that “Nel complesso, sembra che la terminologia filosofica araba a riguardo di questo vocabolo sia stata influenzata da quella presente in altre lingue più o meno vicine; in effetti, si può notare come il concetto di ‘vuoto’, apparentemente legato a quello di ‘privazione’ nelle lingue iraniche e dell’India e dell’Estremo Oriente, abbia forse lasciato qualche traccia, diretta o indiretta, anche sul termine arabo ‘*adam*, legato in origine al concetto della non-esistenza”.

This interesting volume contains a table of the systems of transliteration (p. 34), as well as indexes of the terms (pp. 301-19), quoted passages (pp. 320-4), and Ancient, Medieval and Modern names (pp. 325-9).

Issam Marjani