Book Review: Ibn Sina and his Influence on the Arabic and Latin World

Abstract:

This review examines *Ibn Sina and his Influence on the Arabic and Latin World* by Jules Janssens, a collected volume that explores the intellectual legacy of Ibn Sina (Avicenna) across Islamic and Latin Christian traditions. The book stands out in the Variorum series by including a new introductory chapter that contextualizes the philosopher's influence on figures such as al-Ghazālī, Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, and Henry of Ghent. The review highlights Janssens' methodological rigor and his challenge to conventional portrayals of Avicenna's reception—particularly the reassessment of al-Ghazālī's relationship to Avicennian thought. While the book's limited index and lack of editorial updates are noted as drawbacks, the volume is ultimately praised as a significant and insightful contribution to Avicennian scholarship and the broader study of intercultural philosophical transmission.

The Review:

Jules Janssens' Ibn Sina and his Influence on the Arabic and Latin World is a formidable contribution to Avicennian studies, offering both seasoned scholars and new readers an erudite yet accessible entry into the complex legacy of one of the most influential figures in Islamic and Western thought. Published as part of the Ashgate–Variorum series, which typically reprints previously published materials, this volume distinguishes itself by including a newly written introductory chapter: "Ibn Sina and his heritage in the Islamic world and in the Latin West." This chapter is not a mere overview; it functions as a conceptual map, framing the sixteen collected essays and guiding readers through the intricate intellectual terrain that spans from late antique Neoplatonism to Latin scholasticism.

The volume as a whole is anchored in a central scholarly concern: the transmission, reception, and transformation of Ibn Sina's philosophical thought across cultural and linguistic boundaries. Janssens deftly explores how Ibn Sina, drawing from Alexandrian Neoplatonism and Qur'anic metaphysics, formulated a vision of the God-world relationship that deeply shaped Islamic philosophical theology. Yet the scope of the book extends well beyond Avicenna's immediate intellectual milieu. Several essays trace the afterlives of Avicennian thought in both the Islamic East—through figures such as al-Ghazālī—and the Christian Latin West, where his metaphysics, psychology, and cosmology were taken seriously by towering thinkers such as Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, and especially Henry of Ghent.

One of the volume's most compelling contributions lies in the group of essays (particularly IX–XI) addressing the often-oversimplified relationship between al-Ghazālī and Ibn Sina. These essays challenge the conventional narrative of al-Ghazālī as Avicenna's staunch opponent. Instead, Janssens demonstrates with textual precision that al-Ghazālī was deeply engaged with, and in many respects indebted to, the Avicennian tradition. This nuanced reassessment not only illuminates al-Ghazālī's complex positioning within the Islamic philosophical landscape but also reinforces Janssens' broader historiographical project: to unsettle inherited binaries and emphasize the fluid, dialogical nature of philosophical development across traditions.

The collected essays, written in both English and French, cover a wide range of themes—epistemology, metaphysics, theology, and the legacy of Avicenna in Persian texts—all marked by Janssens' meticulous scholarship and philological rigor. One of the book's strengths is the subtlety with which it tracks Avicennian ideas in unexpected places, revealing the philosopher's expansive and enduring influence.

Despite its many strengths, the volume is not without limitations. The index, restricted to proper names and spanning a mere two pages, limits the book's utility as a reference tool. The absence of subject indexing or thematic cross-referencing is especially felt given the breadth of material covered. Moreover, there are no editorial reflections, errata, or addenda to update or contextualize the reprinted pieces, a missed opportunity in a field as dynamic as Islamic and comparative philosophy.

Nevertheless, this collection succeeds as both an introduction to and an advanced study of Avicennian influence. Janssens' work is particularly valuable for readers interested in the transmission of philosophy across religious and linguistic frontiers, and in the nuanced interplay between continuity and critique in philosophical traditions. By resisting simplistic narratives and tracing intellectual debts with care and depth, Janssens reaffirms the necessity of intertextual and intercultural approaches to the study of classical philosophy.

Ibn Sina and his Influence on the Arabic and Latin World is a landmark in Avicennian scholarship and a testament to Jules Janssens' role as a key figure in the study of Islamic and comparative philosophy. It invites its readers not only to revisit Avicenna, but also to reconsider the broader currents of philosophical exchange that shaped both the Islamic East and the Latin West.

~ *Marwa Atif*

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