

The Value of Arabic Philosophy and Science

An Interview with Dag Nikolaus Hasse

Interviewer: Mohammed Alrushoodi

Introduction

Our guest today is the philologist and philosopher Dr. Dag Nikolaus Hasse, who has opened up fundamental new insights into the beginnings of modern Europe, for which he is now being recognized with the **Leibniz Prize** in 2016. His oeuvre is primarily concerned with the relationships between Christian-Latin, Arabic and Jewish philosophy, theology and natural science from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment. In a series of studies Dr. Hasse has demonstrated how intensive and fertile the cultural exchange was between scholars and institutions in the Orient and the Occident. In his work, he brings together historical-philological research with the detective's powers of observation and new analytical methods he has developed himself. For example, with the aid of computer-based methods he identified peculiarities of language among individual translators of Arabic texts and thus reconstructed their influence on the great schools of translation as well as courtly scholarship in the East and West. Equally seminal are two long-term projects under his leadership which are shedding light on the changes to the Ptolemaic worldview in the West-East dialogue and connections in terms of scholarly language between the Latin and the Arabic world.

Dr. Hasse got his master in Latin philology, philosophy and Arabic at Universität of Göttingen, was a postgraduate student in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Yale University, provided his PhD dissertation on “Avicenna’s De anima in the Latin West, 1160–1300” at London University, became a postdoctoral researcher at University of Tübingen and now he is a history of philosophy professor at University of Würzburg. His new book *Success and Suppression: Arabic Sciences and Philosophy in the Renaissance* by Harvard University Press is available in English.

Dr. Hasse, welcome to Hekmah Journal. We are glad for such an opportunity to present you to the Arabic reader, first, through your article on SEP, [The Influence of Arabic and Islamic Philosophy on the Latin West](#), and now through this exclusive interview.

We are familiar with your interview with about your book *Success and Suppression*, which hopefully will be translated to Arabic soon, someone might say that interview covered the successful side, therefore, the majority of today’s questions will be from the other side of your book, 'the suppressed' one:

How did you become interested in Arabic and Islamic philosophy, in particular, and its influence on the West?

As a young student at Göttingen University, I was enthusiastic about the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle, but disappointed about the fact that so much research had been done on these figures that I felt nothing new can be written about them. At this point I remembered from reading history books and from reading Umberto Eco’s “The Name of the Rose” that Greek philosophers were read in Arabic and that Arabic philosophers were, in turn, read in the medieval Latin world. Here I saw an opportunity to study a chapter of intellectual history which was understudied and where many discoveries could be made.

Some say that the West was drown into ignorance and darkness until Arabic philosophy and sciences arrived and sparked the light. Others say that the “Arabic scholars” were nothing more than transformers of the Greek sciences. Where do you stand on this issue?

I like your question, because I agree with you that people tend to form extreme judgements, instead of doing sober historical research.

Both positions are simplifications that have been proved wrong in research. First: There were important and even brilliant Western philosophers and scientists in the West before the advent of Arabic sources, such as Peter Abelard. And second: Arabic scientists were not mere transformers of the Greek sciences – just like Greek scientists were not mere transformers of Mesopotamian and Old Egyptian astronomy and geometry. All scientists draw on the previous work of others. But they differ much in quality and originality. And many classical Arabic scientists are very impressive for their quality, originality and influence. Of course, there are also those Arabic scientists who only repeat what their predecessors say, but this is a phenomenon that we encounter in all cultures.

Hence, the answer is: Yes, Latin Europe owes much to very original Arabic scientists and philosophers, but only in certain areas of knowledge and without being rescued from a so-called “darkness”.

Could you please elaborate more on what you stated in your book *Success and Suppression* that “Arabic culture was a source culture of equal rank with the Greek and the Roman.”?

My statement about Arabic culture as a source culture of equal rank with the Greek and the Roman was made with respect to Western university culture in the later Middle Ages. In the 13th-16th centuries, the students at Western Universities, especially in medicine, astrology and philosophy, were reading many texts by Arabic authors in Latin translation. In that sense, Arabic culture was a source

culture of equal rank with the Greek and the (Pagan) Roman culture. This is not true, however, for other areas of medieval culture, such as literature, ethics, or religion, where ancient sources were much more important than Arabic sources.

- **Considering your other statement in the same book that says, “The present book is about the conscious Western appropriation of Arabic thought”, thus, on what sense the Arabic culture was *equal* to the Greek and Roman.**

The Renaissance reception of Arabic sciences was a conscious appropriation, because the students knew that they were reading texts by authors with Latinized Arabic names: ‘Avicenna’, ‘Averroes’, ‘Rhazes’, ‘Albumasar’, ‘Haly Rodoan’ etc. But there were also many subconscious Arabic influences in Western science and philosophy: The mathematics and astronomy textbooks of the Renaissance, for example, were largely based on Arabic sources, but most students were not aware of this.

- **“The Renaissance was the crucial period in which the West began to disconnect from its Arabic sources,” you wrote. Is it still equal until today?**

The Arabic influence in the Latin West was greatest in the 13th to 16th centuries. This is and will always remain part of Western history, even if it is not always acknowledged. Today, in a globally connected world, in a world where Arabs are professors in New York or Paris and where Germans are professors in Kairo or Beirut, there are so many channels of reciprocal influences that a phrase like “source culture of equal rank” does not make much sense any more.

Aside from the history of philosophy, to what extent translation is generally important to a culture? And to what extent a culture is affected by translation?

Translation in general is an extremely important factor in world history. Some translators, such as Hieronymus (Jerome), the Latin translator of the bible, or Martin Luther, the German translator, have changed the history of Christian Europe. Of course, oral transmission is an important factor too. We know, for instance, that many motives of oriental story-telling travelled orally to occidental cultures. But, even in this area textual translations are of paramount importance: one single textual translation, the Latin translation of Arabic and Hebrew tales by Petrus Alfonsi in the early twelfth century was more influential than the entire oral transmission of oriental tales. It had an influence on, for instance, the novellas of Boccaccio's famous book *Decamerone*.

There were three Arabic theories translated in the Medieval Latin West (Averroes' theory of the unicity of the intellect, Avicenna's naturalistic explanation of miracles and spontaneous generation), but they had resonance among Renaissance reader. Why did the resonance come late? And are there other Arabic theories that you deem they would have had similar influences but did not get the chance?

The three theories you mention (about the intellect, about miracles and about spontaneous generation) are only three examples of many more Arabic theories that were influential in the Renaissance. These are the ones I know best and which I discuss in the article '[Arabic Philosophy and Averroism](#)' of 2007, but much research needs to be done on other areas of Renaissance thought, where Arabic influence is very tangible: for instance in logic, zoology, metaphysics, alchemy, magic and astronomy.

A good number of Arabic theories, of course, were not known in the Latin world: for instance, Arabic modal logic (i.e. the logic of sentences with 'possible' and 'necessary') or later Arabic mathematics such as Umar Khayyam's method for solving cubic equations.

After the discovery of the Pulmonary Circulation was attributed to [Ibn Al-Nafis](#) instead of [William Harvey](#), some Arab scholars attempted to prove that Ibn al-Shatir was the first one who discovers the movement of heavenly bodies preceding Nicolaus Copernicus. Do you have any comment on this matter?

It is true that some of the planetary models of the Maragha school of astronomy, especially by Ibn al-Shatir and al-Tusi, are very similar to the planetary models of Nicolaus Copernicus. It is still undecided in research (and, in fact, hotly disputed) whether these models were developed independently of each other in Persia and Europe or whether Copernicus was indeed influenced by the Maragha astronomers. I believe, as I mentioned above, in the importance of textual transmission. We have not yet been successful in discovering a textual channel through which Copernicus possibly got to know Maragha theories. As long as we don't have this textual evidence, the assumption of an independent, parallel discovery of planetary models is more likely. In any case, Copernicus' real fame rests not on his planetary models, but on his heliocentrism, which was NOT discovered in Maragha.

AlGazali is a troubling figure in Arabic philosophy. He is a theologian who tirelessly opposed philosophers, but simultaneously he was a philosopher himself too. Some argue that he opposed science and scientific methods and led to religious extremism and gradual decline of the Arabic and Islamic sciences. Others opposed this position arguing that AlGazali was misunderstood. Where Dr. Hasse stands in these issues about AlGazali?

You are right that it is difficult to place al-Ghazali historically, since he was an enemy and a promoter of philosophy at the same time, and both his philosophical work and his anti-philosophical polemics are brilliantly argued. It would be wrong, historically, to make him responsible for religious extremism or for an

alleged decline of science. In fact, religious extremists today usually find al-Ghazali irritating because of all his problematizing of Islamic doctrines! There is no simple dogma in al-Ghazali.

It is an open question of research whether al-Ghazali's anti-philosophical polemics had a significant historical influence or not. In any case, it seems wise not to overemphasize his importance. There were many other Muslim (and also Christian and Jewish) theologians of the same period who contributed to the philosophical discussion.

An interesting quote in your book *Success and Suppression* says that “A major turning point in the history of Arabic philosophy was the activity of Avicenna”, what was so special about Avicenna that made him a ‘turning point’?

Before Avicenna, philosophy was mainly conceived as a Greek heritage that was interesting only for a small elite. After and because of Avicenna, philosophy with all its disciplines – logic, natural philosophy, mathematics, metaphysics – gradually became attractive for all educated people of the Arabic world, and from the 13th century onwards was taught also in the Madrasa. There are many reasons for the special role of Avicenna: sociological, textual etc. Let me point out two reasons: First, Avicenna was a philosopher who was also a physician and who was well-versed in Islamic law and theology, and thus he successfully connected the Greek philosophical tradition to medical and theological trends of his time. And second, Avicenna simply was a brilliant mind with a great talent for logical and systematic thinking.

The majority of the academic textbooks, in almost all specialties, subscribed to the standard narrative that the history of philosophy and science started in Athen, then Rome, then centuries of darkness, and then eventually followed by the re-emergence

of the Western civilization. Where we can find the “political correctness” to which some scholars pointed out in defending their claim which says, “scholarship today exaggerates the intellectual achievements of medieval Islam and the Arabic influence in Europe”?

- Is there any foreseeable change that may include, with accuracy, the Arabic influence in the future?
- And during the rise of Islamophobia in the West, do you think that the knowledge of the Arabic influence on the West will make a genuine difference in people’s minds about the West, Western culture and Islam today?

More and more Western textbooks, in fact, contain chapters on the contribution of Arabic sciences and philosophy to European history. In fact, I believe that the Islamophobic polemics against such chapters is so fervent exactly because these people are fighting a losing cause: Knowledge about the Arabic influence is more and more widespread today in Europe! And, yes, such a knowledge is a good antidote against Islamophobia.

But at the same time, it is very important for everybody not to exaggerate the achievements of Arabic scientists and not to forget that many Arabic scientists were Jews or Christians, or Persians and Turks. That’s why proper historical and philological studies are so important: to come to a balanced judgement about the past, without denigration and without exaggeration.

You said once on a previous [interview](#) that “as a student of Arabic, I realized that my Renaissance heroes of Greek and Latin culture were, on many occasions, bitterly opposed to my new heroes, the great Arabic philosophers and scientists.” Your old heroes ‘opposed’ the new on what sense? Can you give us an example?

Francesco Petrarca (14th century) is a good example. He was a great Renaissance scholar of Latin, one of the first humanists, but, like many humanists, he attacked

the Andalusian philosopher Averroes for being an enemy of religion (mistakenly – Averroes was not an enemy of religion). Other humanists attacked Averroes for his ignorance of Greek and for reading Aristotle only in Arabic translation. Hence, my old Latin heroes like Petrarca, Valla or Erasmus were opposed to my new Arabic heroes like Averroes or Avicenna. Since I have admiration for all these scholars, I found this irritating. In my book, I try excavate the motivations behind the polemics and to judge their justification. As often in history, good reasons and ideology are mixed together: the humanists were right, for instance, with criticizing Averroes’ limitations as a commentator on Aristotle, since he did not know Greek, but they were wrong with their radical rejection of Arabic pharmacology, which proved indispensable for Renaissance medicine.

With the aid of computer-based methods, you identified peculiarities of language among individual translators of Arabic texts and thus reconstructed their influence on the great schools of translation as well as courtly scholarship in the East and West. Could you tell us more about this project and its findings?

Many Arabic-Latin translations of the Middle Ages were anonymous. This is why I have tried – in several studies since 2010 – to describe the stylistic fingerprint of translators whose name we know, such as Michael Scot. For this I have used both philological and computer-based statistical methods. The preliminary results that we see so far show that a few translators were responsible for many more translations than we knew: John of Seville and Dominicus Gundisalvi in twelfth-century Spain (Toledo and elsewhere), and Michael Scot in thirteenth-century Sicily and Southern Italy. These were enormously important figures. It is my hope that in the future we will be able to solve most unsolved riddles about these translators – and thus can pay due respect to these persons who much influenced history!

You have been working on another important project, the Latin-Arabic Glossary, tell us more about this project. I believe that only A-C were completed, approximately when is it going to be completed? And what do you wish for such project to accomplish?

The “Arabic and Latin Glossary” is published online since 2009. It is a dictionary that covers the terminology of the Arabic-Latin translations of the Middle Ages. Yes, letters A-C are finished, and our ambitious aim is to be very fast and reach letter Z in 2026, when we run out of funding. But it is a lot of work! For your readers it may be important to know that you can use the “Arabic and Latin Glossary” without knowledge of Latin: You can use it also as an Arabic-English dictionary of the terminology of Arabic sciences and philosophy.

On your observation, has there been any change in the popularity of Arabic philosophy today in Europe?

Arabic philosophy is much more popular in Europe than it was 20 years ago, which is very visible in the many translations of Arabic philosophers published recently, e.g. in German, French or Italian, and in the curricula of European universities, where Arabic philosophy is read much more often than in my student years.

Even though Rhazes had 67 printed Latin editions and was a central like Avicenna and Averroes, we do not see him having much attention in your work. Will he? Or is there any particular reason not to?

That is a very good observation. The influence of Rhazes (Abu Bakr ibn Zakariya’ al-Razi) in the Renaissance centers on one very important text: book 9 of his al-Kitab al-Mansuri fi al-tibb (Liber ad Almansorem), which offers a

description of human diseases from head to toe. This text was used everywhere in the medical education of students in the Renaissance. Rhazes was also well known as an authority in alchemy. But I am not an expert either on the theory of diseases or on alchemy, and there is not much research on Rhazes' influence in the Latin West – this is an area where much work still needs to be done! This is why I do not cover Rhazes sufficiently in *Success and Suppression*.

We enjoyed having you, Dr. Hasse, as the first guest in our Monthly Series with Intellectuals. We would like to conclude this interview by asking about your next book, what will it be?

I hope a book on the history of Arabic-Latin translations from the tenth to the fourteenth century! But that's a long way to go.