



PROJECT MUSE®

*The Iranian Metaphysicals: Explorations in Science, Islam
and the Uncanny* by Alireza Doostdar (review)

Jude P. Dougherty

The Review of Metaphysics, Volume 72, Number 1 (Issue No. 285),
September 2018, pp. 132-133 (Review)

Published by The Philosophy Education Society, Inc.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/rvm.2018.0014>



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/736120>

ways that resonate with his essay) that science itself is a form of human praxis that likewise enacts an aesthetic rationality, that science no less than art is reversibly intertwined with the inherent creativity of perception. There is a fundamental tension here, but a very fertile one, and the further thoughts that this volume will surely inspire will be strongest when they take it up integrally.—Bryan Smyth, *University of Mississippi*

DOOSTDAR, Alireza. *The Iranian Metaphysicals: Explorations in Science, Islam and the Uncanny*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2018. xiv + 295 pp. Cloth, \$85.00; paper, \$29.95—It must first be noted that “the metaphysicals” are not metaphysicians in the Aristotelian sense. Alireza Doostdar’s subject is not as one would expect the study of the philosophy of al-Kindi, Al Farabim, and Avicenna, Persia’s three great medieval philosophers who remain part of the Western philosophical canon.

The metaphysicals of Doostdar’s exploration are those who hold that the physical does not exhaust the realm of being, namely, that there is something supra-natural or meta-physical. The recognition that there is a spiritual realm apart from the material world of sense experience is the foundation of Islamic belief and practice. Islamic theology holds that there is world apart from the perceptible, namely, the realm of God and a hierarchy of angels. Angels, it is believed, serve the divine as instruments of revelation and inspiration. That there will be a final judgment and a life hereafter is also an integral part of Islamic orthodoxy.

Doostdar’s is not an abstract treatise. He is not writing in a vacuum but is very much engaged in describing and, one may say, prescribing, for present day Iran. It is important to recognize that, “[s]ince the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, theological and scientific rationalities have converged in the formation of Islamic state policy.” Expressed another way, Islamic *polity* defines itself by religion, that is, as a society in which identity and allegiance are determined by the acceptance of a common faith. The distinction between church and state, spiritual and temporal, ecclesial and lay, is a Christian concept that has no analogue in Islamic history.

Doostdar finds that in Iran there is a predominant strain of rational theology that draws upon a centuries-old Shi’i tradition of philosophical, theological, and jurisprudential inquiry. “It grants a privileged place,” Doostdar says, “to intellect where dominion, capacities, and limitations have been debated and elaborated for centuries.” Shi’i orthodoxy may prevail in contemporary Iran, but there are other metaphysical currents that are spiritually deviant and irreligious. According to Doostdar, “[w]e cannot understand contemporary religion in Iran, including its intellectual and orthodox manifestation, without equally attending the metaphysical

inquires of occult scientists and spiritual explorers [for example, the Cosmic Mystics].”

Islam, by his account, is confronted with another problem facing orthodoxy. Given its opening to a Western-style economy, how can the Islamic Republic avoid a similar opening in politics and culture? How can it continue to foster a certain set of values and ideals while at the same time permitting a Western market economy that leads the populace to make lifestyle changes at odds with those values? Doostdar is not the first to raise the question. Bernard Lewis did as much in his book *What Went Wrong*, when he observed that Western science and technology are based on philosophical premises at odds with Islam.

Doostdar believes that the liberalism introduced by President Khatami may be the source of the present-day youthful defiance of traditional norms, and its flight from religion and its opposition to state-enforced religiosity. With the ascendancy of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, the orthodox find themselves once again in power. But the influence of liberal reformers in Europe and North America remains strong even among Iran’s “religious intellectuals.”

Other issues arise. The state’s insistence on outward religious performance is considered by many to be promoted at the expense of inner faith. The pressure of modernization, Doostdar fears, has indeed undermined traditional Islamic practices of learning, argument, and virtuous striving. “Those who have been trained in modern scientific disciplines, and the larger group of people who are exposed to scientific models and terminology, are given to understand their condition in Western scientific terms without understanding their many nuances.” Then too, the overwhelming success of modern science to explain the material world and its obvious technological beneficence has given scientific accounts a kind of a priori plausibility, at the expense of religious witness.

It is difficult to categorize this book. It is not a metaphysical treatise as its title may imply. At times it seems to be an anthropological investigation, at other times a sociological study. Be that as it may, it is an invaluable source for anyone who desires to understand the complexities of contemporary Islamic culture.—Jude P. Dougherty, *The Catholic University of America*

EMILSSON, Eyjólfur K. *Plotinus*. London: Routledge, 2017. x + 410 pp. Paper, \$39.99. Cloth, \$221.00—This is the first monograph dedicated to Plotinus’s thought as a whole since Lloyd Gerson’s *Plotinus* (1994). While Gerson sometimes introduced distinctions and concerns foreign to Plotinus, Emilsson intends to summarize Plotinus’s philosophy within its original context. He presents a systematic descriptive account of Plotinus’s