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Review of *History of the Concept of Mind, Volume 2: The Heterodox and Occult Tradition* by Paul S. Macdonald (Aldershot: Ashgate 2007), pp. 460 + xvii  
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When four years ago I reviewed Paul Macdonald's *History of the Concept of Mind: Speculations about Soul, Mind and Spirit from Homer to Hume* (BJHP 2004, 12:4: 743-52), it never occurred to me that a second volume would ever appear, and if it had occurred to me, then I probably would have anticipated a continuation of the story from Hume to the present day. I certainly would never have guessed that I would one day be handed a new book, packaged as a mirror image of the previous one, but this time with the addition of a rather sinister silhouette of the Egyptian god Anubis lurking behind the title, as befitting the new subject-matter of the 'Heterodox and Occult Tradition'. My instant thought, I must admit, was that I probably should not have written such a positive review of the first book, and that I must somehow have overlooked something in taking it to be of serious philosophical interest, given that this new one looked like something the bookshops could well be excused for shelving alongside 'new age' books about witchcraft and the like. This thought was soon dispelled, however, and there is no question that this is just as impressive a piece of scholarship as the first; in some ways it is an improvement, since significant defects of the first volume are absent this time around. The content, however, is certainly very different indeed, and for a philosopher whose first book was entitled *Descartes and Husserl* (New York: State University of New York Press 1999), Macdonald has clearly travelled a long way.

Macdonald begins the introduction by saying that, 'There are two (or three) main highways along which western speculation about the nature of the world and the human soul have travelled', namely Platonic dualism, Aristotelian hylomorphism, and materialism; he is unsure about including materialism because its history was 'interrupted for 1500 years' (xiii), and indeed, there was something of an anti-materialist bias in the first volume. This time, however, his concern is with 'other less well-remarked paths, trodden usually by the few or the chosen alone' (xiv), with the distinctive features of this heterodox tradition being that it involves secret doctrines, more concerned with techniques for the soul's ascent than with natural explanation, and lending themselves to practical application through magic spells and rituals. Macdonald goes on to argue that early Christianity drove magic underground by associating it with the invocation of demons, thereby neglecting the distinction between 'natural magic', which was the practice of using spells to extract naturally inexplicable or occult powers from nature, and 'demonic magic', the aim of which was to summon demons to exercise their powers in the world. Despite the best efforts of the Christians, magical ideas continued to be influential until the advent of mechanistic science in the seventeenth century, when the 'model of a world-machine [supplanted] the model of a world-spirit' (xvi), thereby undermining any notion of harnessing hidden spiritual powers with the aid of secret techniques. Nevertheless, although such ideas lost credibility at this point, they continued to influence mainstream thinkers, most notably Goethe, who is the final figure discussed in the book (392-401).

The first chapter covers ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Zoroastrianism of early Iran. Just as in the first volume, Macdonald has compiled an extraordinary amount of information, and gives an up-to-date and very readable survey of the scholarly literature, providing the reader with an ideal introduction to the Egyptian concepts of 'ka', 'ba', and 'akh', for instance. Macdonald goes into some detail explaining the various sources for our knowledge in these matters, and also describes the religious beliefs and burial practises of these peoples. Some of this material is interesting, and lots of colourful detail is included, as for instance when we are told about an Assyrian cult which involved 'turning oneself into a eunuch in a frenzied act of self-mutilation' (32), but it is sometimes not at all clear what the relevance to the history of the concept of mind is supposed to be. Macdonald does a better job of adjudicating between competing interpretations than in the first volume, in which he often seemed content to merely relate differences of opinion between scholars, but there remains a lack of focus, a tendency to put all of the information down without relating it to an historical narrative. So, for instance, I can readily agree that it somehow seems relevant to the development of the concept of mind that the Egyptians thought a person's shadow would become detached from their body after death. But what exactly is the relevance? Macdonald never says, but instead moves ever onwards to the next idea, leaving the book at times reading like an encyclopaedia in continuous prose form.

Chapter Two does have a thesis, and indeed, one which connects up the two volumes. It is that the concept of mind which developed in the pre-Socratic philosophers was directly influenced by the shamanic practices of Central Asia. In fact according to Walter Burkert, who Macdonald seems to agree with, shamanism was the 'source' of Platonic dualism, since 'The independence of the soul from the body is immediately experienced and depicted in the shaman's ecstasy' (68). This 'ecstasy' was achieved, it seems, through the use of 'the hallucinogenic haoma compound' (76; see also 44-6), as well as the 'marijuana-saunas' (79) mentioned by Herodotus (IV. 74-5). Through the experiences induced by these drugs, then, the shamans believed themselves able to separate from their bodies, allowing communication with the dead, the Gods, or both; most of the chapter is taken up by the plentiful evidence for the existence and nature of these practices, as well as for their influence on pre-Socratic philosophers such as Empedocles, and in turn, Plato. Although certainly a bold thesis, however, it is not clear that this is particularly significant for our understanding of the concept of mind, since even if intuitions about the transcendence of mind did ultimately derive from this source, there are plenty of more mundane experiences which could just as easily have prompted them, such as our ability to transcend our present situation in imagination or dreams, for instance. It is also hard to believe that Plato would not have reasoned his way to the separability of mind and body without this exotic influence, given that the Egyptians, Mesopotamians, and Zoroastrians apparently had plenty of similar ideas.

The long Chapter Three covers the Hermetica, Gnosticism, Manichaeism, and Neo-Platonism, and the short Chapter Four covers Byzantine philosophy. The Hermetica, a collection of mystical texts probably composed in Egypt around 100-250 A.D., and supposedly dictated through Earthly intermediaries by Hermes Trismegistos, presents a confusing, not altogether consistent body of doctrine according to which the human being, soul or mind, is ascribed two, three, four or even eight parts, forms, elements,

faculties, drives, etc. More interesting is the idea that ‘only through an understanding of the true ‘reasons’ for their being ... can humans transform mere reason into mind’ (105), an idea reminiscent of the existentialist ideal of ‘authenticity’, although the point of transforming yourself in this way for followers of the Hermetic doctrines was to achieve immortality, rather than to embrace finitude. If Hermetism seemed a disparate collection of ideas, the numerous works composing the Gnostic canon present a veritable ‘philosophical-theological monster’ (130-1), and so Macdonald’s first task is to determine whether there is any coherent body of doctrine deserving of the name. He decides there is, but since this mainly consists in florid creation myths and descriptions of life post-mortem, its relevance to the concept of mind is far from obvious. Manicheism does have something distinctive to say about the soul amidst its asceticism and general disdain for physicality, by offering a ‘traducian theory of the soul’ (148) according to which believers who properly control their evil bodies can achieve salvation by ‘collecting’ their soul-fragments into a unified soul at the point of death. In the section on ‘heterodox’ neo-Platonism (Plotinus was covered in Volume 1), focusing on Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus, the subject-matter becomes more recognisably philosophical, although the various theories about the soul’s unity and activity are again mixed up with techniques for achieving salvation. And then in the chapter on the Byzantines, we encounter some obscure precursors for familiar philosophical ideas, such as Leontios of Byzantium’s view that there is ‘no natural bond between soul and body, but rather a union imposed by God’s power’ (188), and Maximus the Confessor’s view that ‘the soul can only be understood by its acts’ (192). That said, most of the chapter is taken up with biography and theology.

Chapter Five, which is about Christian mysticism, begins with Pseudo-Dionysius and Eriugena, the treatment of the latter relying heavily on Dermot Moran’s book *The Philosophy of John Scotus Eriugena* (CUP 1989). Both suggest later idealist themes concerning the limitations of human knowledge, with fifth century Pseudo-Dionysius arguing that since God lies ‘beyond the reach of every rational process’ (218), we must seek out the ‘darkness’ of ‘complete unknowing’ (221), and ninth century Eriugena anticipating ‘the profoundest insights of Kant’ (209) by arguing that the mind has absolute freedom, and projects itself into an illusionary spatial-temporal world because ‘perception and cognition could only take place over time’ (228). These themes are not developed, however, since Macdonald’s approach is essentially chronological, and so the reader is thereafter plunged into the entertaining but philosophically jejune world of medieval stories of ‘soul voyages’, and the elaborate creation myth of Bernard Silvestris’ *Cosmography*. Meister Eckhart receives a vivid treatment later on, his talk of God as a ‘pure nothing’ and ‘being-less being’ (275) perhaps going some way to explaining Heidegger’s enthusiasm for this thirteenth to fourteenth century mystic, and it is interesting to note that Eckhart considered the ‘soul-spark’ (277), the non-spatial-temporal part of the mind bearing traces of divinity, to be a ‘nothingness’ too. Proceedings conclude with a short but fascinating comparison between the views of St. John of the Cross and Descartes, born five years after St. John’s death; the book would have greatly benefited from many more such comparisons with the orthodox tradition, but there is only one other (between van Helmont and Leibniz (382-4)).

Chapter Six concerns the ‘magical view of the soul’ (299), but amidst all the relentless detail about demons and potions gleaned from various esoteric tomes, a distinctively

magical conception of the soul stubbornly fails to materialise, so that when Macdonald writes of one of these medieval magic books, the *Picatrix*, that '[t]he reader struggles to keep a focus on any single theme, as we do here with the magical soul' (309), the ambiguity in the sentence makes it all too easy to read this as a confession. The problem is generally that the author in question will discuss both magic and the soul, without making any distinctive conceptual connections between the two; this certainly seems to be the case with William of Auvergne (1180-1249), whose conception of mind comes across as astonishingly close to that of Descartes, despite Macdonald's unexplained assertion that we should not make the comparison (320). The discussion of Francis Bacon is another case in point (365-72), for since his conception of soul was essentially Aristotelian, the only apparent justification for including him here is that he held a conception of matter indebted to the alchemist Paracelsus (349-56). Nevertheless, despite most of these authors having little distinctively magical to say about the soul, and in some cases little to say about it at all, the material is usually strange enough to be distracting, one memorable example being Johannes Reuchlin's belief in a 'wonder-working word [which] will allow the philosopher-magician to bypass the dangers associated with demonic powers' (341): the word was 'IHSUS', by the way. The chapter ends with a well-executed summary of the plot of *Faust*, followed by an interpretation of Goethe as originating the notion of life as a project of self-creation; I was unable to ascertain why exactly.

In my review of Volume 1, I said that the conclusion was 'inadequate for a book of this ambition', but this time Macdonald has produced something appropriately substantive (although once again some of it is copy-and-pasted, e.g. xvi / 411). Macdonald's principal conclusion, based on evidence from over 3000 years, is that the concepts of mind and soul have undergone complex processes of abstraction and interiorisation in line with changing notions of life, deity and personhood. This new volume adds to the complexity and subtlety of Macdonald's story, and hence has philosophical relevance, especially at a time when contemporary physicalists are struggling to concretise and exteriorise the mind, and one of the hottest topics in philosophy of mind is the nature of 'phenomenal concepts', a debate in which these concepts are treated as if they were natural kinds, rather than vaguely demarcated historical deliverances. For my own conclusion, then, I must highly recommend this book, for I have been fascinated by it ever since I received it, despite the obviousness of its two main faults, namely that the text is too close to the sources from which it was compiled, and that it strays off-topic too often. But then again, the book is unique, so it is not as though some other author has done a better job of imposing narrative on this vast array of near-impregnable literature. So I now find myself wondering: will it be Gilbert Ryle or Aleister Crowley who features in Volume 3?