

Margaret J. Osler. *Reconfiguring the World: Nature, God, and Human Understanding from the Middle Ages to Early Modern Europe*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 2010. Pp. 167. Paper \$25.00.

Margaret Osler's *Reconfiguring the World* focuses on the shift of intellectual paradigms as Europe transitioned from the medieval period to the early modern era, ca. 1450-1750. Her work explicates the movement away from pure Aristotelian thought and towards an understanding of the world through a new mechanical philosophy of nature. Osler, a Professor of History and Philosophy at the University of Calgary, successfully explains the way in which the early modern period shaped the intellectual foundations of modernity.

Osler's work poses a simple question: From 1450 to 1750, how did early modern thinkers understand and explain the natural world? To answer this question Osler consults excerpts and reprinted illustrations from philosophical texts written by Aristotle, Ptolemy, Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, and Locke. In eight short chapters, Osler methodically describes how natural philosophy sought a much larger undertaking than what we think of as science today, when it desired to know the causes of *all* the phenomena in the world.

Osler begins by examining the concurrent influences of an unknowable, all-powerful Christian God and the entrenched principles of Greek Aristotelianism on European thought before 1500. Subsequent chapters describe the tradition of critiquing, adapting, and appropriating Aristotelian and theological thought over the next three centuries. The early modern intellectual movements of Renaissance humanism and the Protestant Reformation signaled the final death of Aristotelian deductive reasoning. Osler explains how natural philosophers used inductive reasoning to assert a new mechanical explanation of the world. The convergence of mathematics and mechanics inspired advances in physics, alchemy, chemistry, botany, and anatomy, which consequently produced a philosophy of nature that brought a whole new metaphysics to the world.

Most of Osler's work illustrates precisely how early modern philosophers described and categorized and consequently knew the world. Osler is at her best describing the new tools and techniques with which natural philosophers began to unlock "the secrets of nature." The axioms of calculus and geometry provided early modern philosophers with the ability to describe the physical world through new sciences of motion and sight. With Aristotelian principles set aside, philosophers such as Francis Bacon began to use empirical knowledge to overhaul our understanding of the world, while Gassendi and Descartes asserted man's capability of abstract reasoning as proof of man's possession of an immortal human soul.

A multitude of students walk the halls of academia with at best a vague understanding of who Aristotle or Descartes really were and why exactly they are important to the humanities. In *Reconfiguring* Margaret Osler has impressively created the first step to remedying this deficiency. As an established expert in the History of Ideas (a field in which she has taught and published since the 1960s), Osler's work raises the intellectual pedestal on which the early modern period sits by continuing the efforts of scholars such as Thomas Kuhn and his seminal work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). *Reconfiguring* does not discuss the numerous Arab, Persian, and Jewish scholars who helped shape early modern mechanistic philosophy, but considering

that her work is meant as an introduction to the field, any meaningful discussion of non-western contributions might be beyond its scope. More importantly, Osler's book does compel readers to pursue the advance of early modern philosophy in greater depth. For students interested in early modern history, science, philosophy, or literature, *Reconfiguring the World* succinctly clarifies the importance of early modern intellectual thought.

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