CHAPTER THREE

THE ARISTOTELEAN AND SKEPTICAL REVIVALS
AND THEIR DISINTEGRATIVE IMPACT ON THE
FICINIAN GENIAL THEORY

A. The Averroist Restatement of the Ficinian Genial Doctrine

“Some inclined to melancholy,” the Venetian humanist Ermolao Barbaro the Younger (1453–1493) once wrote, “are favored in their grasp of the arts” (Alii . . . declinans ad melancholicam, magis idonei sunt ad percipiendas artes).¹ In further elucidation of this thesis Barbaro, a personal acquaintance of Ficino and Pico who was contemporaneously lecturing at the University of Padua, also let it be known that natural melancholy, while serving as an important component of artistic genius, is only one ingredient among several. “When we speak of human actions and events which befall men,” Barbaro observed, “we should consider in particular six concurrent causes: the will of man, the temperaments, the stars, God, the Devil, and external force.”² Barbaro’s express object in this writing, addressed to the subject of fate, was to reaffirm the God-given efficacy of the first of these causes of human activity, free will, in its endeavor to overcome the other five causes exerting external sway over the human soul. But Barbaro’s assertion of multiple causation in the effectuation of human activity also points up another lesson of his outlook which he shared with his Florentine friends. This is that natural as well as supernatural causation should be considered in our speculations about human behavior, including such extraordinary behavior as is associated with human genius. Notably agreeing in this regard with Pico’s famous attack on judicial astrology, declaring that “never should all events be referred to the stars,”³ Barbaro also accepted the corresponding view of both Ficino and Pico that the planets are able to

² Ibid., fols. 134v–135r.
³ Ibid., fol. 134v.
play, if not a determinative role in the lives of men, at least a participatory role. More specifically, with respect to the genius question, Barbaro allowed that planetary Saturn, together with humoral melancholy under its aegis, is competent to instill occult genial powers in the soul in cooperation with God and the Devil.

Barbaro has been credited by a number of Renaissance scholars with leading the way in its early cinquecento stages to a revival of Aristotle at Padua corresponding to the revival of Plato at Florence, an important facet of which consisted of a resolve to recover and interpret Aristotle in the Greek original. If, however, Barbaro’s query into the origin of human genius can serve us as an index, his Aristotelian principles proved to be far from impervious to infiltration by the Florentine Platonic revival. The ground that Barbaro’s Aristotle shared with Plato, as it happened, had a far longer history than that upheld by Ficino’s Florentine circle, having been antecedently espoused by followers of the the medieval Arab interpreter of Aristotle, Averroës (= Ibn-Rushd, 1126–1198). For the Averroist belief in a transcendent world-soul, as surely as Ficino’s belief in individual immortality, ultimately depended on a Platonic supernatualist overview. On the basis of this shared philosophical ground the Averroists allowed, in agreement with with the Platonists, that not only wicked demons are

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5 See, e.g., Di Napoli, L’Immortalità, pp. 179 ff., and Randall, Career of Philosophy, esp. pp. 53–5 and 68 ff. As observed by Kristeller, Sources, p. 39, the term “Averroism” as applied to a version of Aristotelianism filtered through the commentaries of the Arab scholar Averroës has become so broadly and generally used by scholars as to make it highly “ambiguous and controversial.” Indeed, in a lecture pub. as “Paduan Averroism and Alexandrism in the Light of Recent Studies,” Atti del XII Congresso Internazionale di Filosofia, IX (1960), 147–55 (at p. 152), Kristeller has advised that the term be dropped altogether as overly vague. However, in this study, quite apart from specific doctrines often associated with Averroism such as that of a universal soul, we will employ the term in keeping rather with Randall’s interpretation of Averroism, as indicated in his Career of Philosophy, I, who notes, p. 54, that Averroës’ Aristotelianism, heavily relying as it did on the Neoplatonic Hellenistic commentators, was also considerably infused with Neoplatonic mystical (viz., supernaturalist) doctrines.