Francesco O. Zamboni. *At the Roots of Causality: Ontology and Aetiology from Avicenna to Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2023. xi + 344 pages. ISBN 9789004684874.

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Francesco Zamboni's monograph tackles the key problem of efficient causality in Islamic philosophy of the 11th and 12th century, from Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā, d. 428/1037) to Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210). An impressive elaboration of the author's PhD thesis discussed at the Scuola Normale Superiore (Pisa, Italy) in 2021 (supervisor Amos Bertolacci), the book offers a sophisticated doctrinal analysis of the notion of efficient cause in Islamic thought, by studying in a comprehensive way its metaphysical and ontological underpinnings. It does so by taking into account a vast selection of thinkers of the post-Avicennian (or post-classical) phase of Islamic philosophy, in keeping with contemporary scholarly efforts to flesh out and refine our understanding of this crucial period in the history of thought, undeservingly marginalized in earlier scholarship. In this sense, the book is particularly indebted to recent work by Ayman Shihadeh, Jari Kaukua, and Frank Griffel, among others, who are also among the most frequently quoted modern scholars in a work which, due to its highly conceptual nature, engages less than others with the ever-increasing body of scholarly literature focusing on the historiography of Islamic philosophy. The authors considered in the monograph include major figures, such as Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī (d. 547/1152 [?]), al-Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191), and most notably Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, as well as relatively minor, but still very relevant intellectuals, like Avicenna's pupils and followers Bahmanyār (d. 458/1066), al-Lawkarī (d. 517/1123), and 'Umar al-Khayyām (d. 526/1132 [?]); "Ghazālīan" thinkers such as Sharaf al-Dīn al-Mas'ūdī (d. 600/1204) and Ibn

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Ghaylān al-Balkhī (d. 590/1194); as well as further authors important for specific viewpoints, like Ibn al-Malāḥimī (d. 536/1141) and Abū al-Fatḥ al-Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153). This list, though long, is still not exhaustive, not least because later thinkers, exceeding the chronological boundaries envisaged in the subtitle, are occasionally considered for further comparison. Moreover, for each author, more than one work is usually taken into account. The result is a wide-spectrum, overarching analysis of the notion of causality, in both theoretical and historical sense, which is unprecedented in scholarship on Islamic philosophy and deserves in itself high praise.

After an Introduction presenting the scope of the work and a very brief bio-bibliographical aperçu on each of the main authors involved, the book is divided into eleven substantial chapters. The first chapter is a well-rounded presentation of Avicenna's doctrine of efficient causality and serves the purpose of preliminarily clarifying its main tenets, before delving into the intricacies of post-Avicennian metaphysical debates, which most often take their cue precisely from Avicenna's positions. The following ten chapters offer in-depth, individual discussions of as many "foundational assumptions" (p. 21) of causality. Each chapter provides a conceptual analysis of one of the assumptions; traces it to Avicenna's theory of causality; shows the positions of Avicenna's interpreters on the matter; and most importantly describes the multifarious debates elicited by the doctrine at stake in post-classical Islamic thought. This kind of systematic approach is particularly welcome due to the subtlety of many points of doctrine treated in the book, as it enables the reader to get a concise, terse overview of a remarkably wide array of key metaphysical debates. The orderly presentation of topics in the main discussion is complemented by the presence of useful summaries placed at the end of each chapter (introduced by an asterism used as a dinkus), which highlight in a succinct and synoptic fashion the continuities and the disruptures occurring in the tradition with respect to Avicenna's starting point. After the ten main chapters, the book features a (perhaps too) brief Conclusion (pp. 321-323), which, however, usefully references the reader to the individual conclusions of the preceding thematic chapters, as well as a Bibliography and two well-compiled Indices. The *Index of Historical Figures and Schools* helps navigating the references to single authors, which are inevitably distributed in the various chapters due to the chosen structure of the analysis, and it allows the reader wishing to do so to gather information on individual thinkers through and across the conceptual grid in which arguments are presented in the book. The *Index of Subjects*, conversely, supports conceptual analysis, by listing virtually all important metaphysical notions introduced

in the discussion. It is particularly beneficial that subjects nested within one another were also itemized, because this allows for a targeted, goal-oriented consultation of the book. For instance, under the concept of "Modulation" the reader will find the sub-topics "By intensity", "By priority and posteriority", "By worthiness", and "Of existence"; under "Persistence", the important topic of "Causeless" persistence is singled out; and even more lower subjects will be found under the umbrella term of "Contingency", arguably one of the most important lemmata of the entire book.

The book arranges the "foundational assumptions" of causality according to Avicenna in three main categories, namely, (a) metaphysics of existence (or ontology), (b) metaphysics of contingency, and (c) metaphysics of efficient causes (or aetiology). The main conceptual distinction divides (a), involved with the essence of causation, from (b) and (c), involved with its existence. As already highlighted in its title, Zamboni's work displays indeed a keen attention to the conceptual connections between ontology and aetiology throughout, yet another confirmation of the highly systematic and conceptual character of the monograph. The most notable of such cases of connection, as acknowledged by the author himself in his conclusions (p. 322), is likely the accidentality of existence, defined in the book as the conjunction of four features of existence with respect to quiddity (distinction, concrete reality, externality, inherence; see pp. 145-146), to which we will come back later.

(a) Premises drawn from metaphysics of existence constitute the necessary conditions for conceiving the essence of efficient causality and are dealt with in Chapters 2-6 of the work. They are (1) the essence of existence as such (Ch. 2, pp. 49-73), (2) universality of existence (Ch. 3, pp. 74-105), (3) conceptual invariance (i.e., non-equivocity) of existence (Ch. 4, pp. 106-121), (4) modulation of existence (Ch. 5, pp. 122-144), and (5) accidentality of existence (Ch. 6, pp. 145-181). Premises (1)-(3) are regarded as necessary requirements for grounding mirror aspects of causality, i.e., its concept (1), its universality (2), and its conceptual invariance (3). Premise (4), known in Arabic as *tashkīk al-wujūd*, is key to conceiving the notion of causal ontological priority because it allows for existence to have different degrees (of which ontological worthiness is an aspect). Finally, (5) accidentality of existence is shown to have all-important aetiological consequences for Avicenna. Most notably, it allows for the subject of causal dependence to be existence (and not quiddity), and it ensures the role of existential composition as the sole "complete" sign of contingency (i.e., the only sign which is true of all and only contingents). This is because the composition of existence and quiddity produces the only kind of conditionality which also holds

true for the separate intellects – which are immaterial, almost completely simple entities, and yet are admitted and conceived to be contingent in Avicenna's cosmology (see p. 150 fn. 19, pp. 179-181, and the concluding remarks at p. 322). Since both of these features of causality are crucial, and since both can be shown to depend on the accidentality of existence, this ontological tenet of Avicenna's can be seen as motivated (also) by aetiological concerns, in a quite momentous finding for the history of Arabic philosophy, and of Avicennian thought in particular.

(b) Premises drawn from metaphysics of contingency constitute the necessary conditions for establishing the possibility of the existence of efficient causes (see p. 1; but in the more detailed presentation of topics at p. 22 only the "actual existence" of causes, and not, as it would have been more precise, the *possibility* of their actual existence, is mentioned as the purport of this kind of premises). Such premises are dealt with in Chapters 7-8 of the work. They are (6) essential contingency, determining to ensure that the principle of sufficient reason may follow (Ch. 7, pp. 182-209), and (7) the existence of signs of contingency, mainly identified with conditionality and coming-to-be (Ch. 8, pp. 210-237). Contingency is needed to ground the very possibility of causal dependence, and thus of efficient causality. (6) Essential contingency is read as an equidistance, or equivalence, of the contingent with respect to both existence and non-existence. As such, it grounds the principle of sufficient reason (see *infra*, 8), which states that a "preponderator" or "selectively determining factor" [*murajjiḥ*] is needed to make the scales of the absolute contingent tilt towards existence, rather than non-existence. We need signs of contingency (7) to identify contingent, *i.e.* causally dependent, beings and to distinguish them from necessary, *i.e.* causally independent, entities.

(c) Finally, premises drawn from the metaphysics of efficient causes, treated in the final three chapters of the book (Chapters 9-11), are meant to establish the actual existence of causes and to characterize it. They are (8) the principle of sufficient reason (Ch. 9, pp. 238-282), (9) the coexistence of cause and effect (Ch. 10, pp. 283-302), and (10) the existential priority of the cause with respect to the effect (Ch. 11, pp. 303-320). (8) In the domain of applicability of the principle of sufficient reason, the required "preponderator" of the existence of the contingent effect is the existence of the cause (and likewise, the non-existence of the cause entails the non-existence of the effect). Thus, (9) the coexistence of cause and effect must follow, which makes it in turn impossible to have a causeless persistence: if something exists, its cause must also be existing at all times. Finally, (10) the last assumption guarantees the direction

of the relation of causal dependence, by ensuring that the effect's existence depends on the cause's (and not vice versa), and thus also that self-causation is impossible.

This complex, orderly, systematic set of premises of Avicenna's understanding of efficient causality serves as a conceptual grid to guide the analysis of the twists, misinterpretations, corrections, counterarguments, alternative suggestions, mental experiments, hypotheses, quarrels, and powerful analyses put forth by the thinkers who came after the *shaykh al-raʾīs* in the Islamic tradition. The variety of opinions expressed in post-Avicennian metaphysical inquiries, as it emerges from Zamboni's masterful reconstruction, truly stretches the limits of what is thinkable, reaching unmatched degrees of abstractness and theoretical sophistication. Accordingly, not even an attempt at summarising them can be offered here. Suffice it to say that Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, the most systematic and indeed towering representative of post-classical Islamic thought, was pivotal in helping the meaningful academic reconstruction of these highly refined debates. He is thus not only a character, and indeed a protagonist, of Zamboni's inquiry, but also, as it were, a fellow scholar, whose doxographical reports and poignant theoretical takes have been essential for the remarkably well-organised presentation of topics achieved in the book. Another by all means major figure of post-Avicennian thought, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, emerges as somewhat less relevant to the overall analysis, although being treated with judicious care throughout. This is probably because the dialectical and refutatory character of his engagement with Avicenna in *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* yields all in all few teachings which can be meaningfully (and safely) treated as positive theses of his, and which could as such be plainly incorporated in the general framework designed by Zamboni. The book's attitude with respect to al-Ghazālī is accordingly cautious, despite being helpfully clear on such a crucial aspect as his conception of divine will as suspension of the principle of sufficient reason (pp. 269 ff.).

Despite its overall unmistakable quality, the work is affected by two minor shortcomings. The first is of editorial nature, and regards the presence of a not negligible amount of typos and other little misprints. This is certainly a secondary and overall unimportant aspect, and I only mention it because the sheer complexity of the arguments requires a very careful reading, which is sometimes troubled by redundant words, missing letters, or misplaced punctuation. On a less extrinsic note, I am inclined to think that more texts could have been directly quoted and translated in the long discussions of arguments and counterarguments of which the book is composed. Of course, precise references to the textual basis of arguments are invariably

given in the footnotes, but the somewhat painstaking effort of retrieving the actual passage in the plethora of referenced works is too often left to the reader. In a way, this is not particularly problematic, since the target audience of Zamboni's monograph is clearly highly specialistic, but the sheer amount of works cited, together with the lamentable editorial status, and sometimes even the difficulty of securing a copy, of many of these, can make the task rather difficult even for a specialist reader. This feature of the book, which goes in the direction of it being a conceptual, rather than a historical/textual analysis, is obliquely but nonetheless clearly acknowledged at the very beginning of the Introduction, where the author even writes that some "important notions, doctrines, and arguments" among the ones he will expound "may be textually implicit" (p. 1). In turn, this candid declaration clarifies that Zamboni considers his task as an interpreter to fill in the gaps. While this may very well be the case, and while I agree that the conceptual completion of arguments (e.g. by supplying missing premises, or by clarifying fleetingly mentioned assumptions) is an important part of the interpreter's job, I also think that quoting (and translating) more extensively from the texts themselves could have benefitted even an expert reader, allowing for an immediate check of the expounded doctrines on a readily available textual basis. This, in turn, could have allowed comparison of linguistic formulations and lexical peculiarities, and not only of all-but-formalized theoretical arguments. On the other hand, it is not lost on me how this approach could have easily produced an extremely ponderous work, while the (relative) agility of the book as it stands certainly goes to its author's merit, being an attestation of his ability to strike a reasonable balance between historical study (with its inescapable philological toll) and theoretical penetration.

Although not all its findings are in themselves entirely novel (but many indeed are), the greatest originality and value of this monograph lie in its painstaking effort at the systematization of an extremely complex variety of metaphysical approaches in post-classical Islam. This powerful systematizing effort has the effect of theoretically clarifying many doctrinal points, of showing their conceptual connections, and of shedding new light also on apparently very well-studied topics, such as the essence-existence distinction (see e.g. the illuminating remarks at p. 145 ff.), or the opposition between necessary and contingent in Avicenna's metaphysics. The status of contingency, from both an ontological and a semantic point of view, is elaborated upon with particular finesse throughout the monograph. Likewise, the pages devoted to the principle of sufficient reason, with its grounding in essential contingency,

its epistemic status, and the possibility of its restricted or unrestricted applicability, show particular acumen and philosophical penetration, as well as historical sensitivity to the diversified positions taken by post-Avicennian authors on the issue. The level of detail of these pages and the overall quality of the analyses of arguments therein provided are unprecedented in scholarship. Despite not being the main focus of the work, theological problems are moreover consistently referenced throughout the monograph, in an attempt to show the conceptual groundedness of theology as *metaphysica specialis* in ontology as *metaphysica generalis* (to use an anachronistic but useful Late scholastic characterization). This theological prospective outlook has the effect of opening up the central discussions about causation to further avenues of philosophical and theological debate, which, though not explored in full on this occasion, would certainly benefit from the book's preliminary elucidations on foundational ontological and aetiological problems.

A note of particular merit is that, despite the abstract and complex nature of its subject matter, the monograph is written with remarkable clarity. Terminological choices are always on point, exposition is terse even when arguments become particularly intricate, and every logical step is scrupulously and lucidly presented, in itself and in its possible implications. Both at the macroscopic level of structure and at the microscopic level of single arguments, the book is methodical, meticulous, and thorough. As such, it is highly recommended to all scholars of Islamic thought, as well as to those interested in the metaphysics of causation from different scholarly perspectives (such as the history of medieval philosophy in Latin or Hebrew, or even, perhaps, contemporary analytic metaphysics involved with the notion of cause). Grounded in extensive readings of Arabic primary literature and corroborated by a keen philosophical understanding of arduous theoretical problems, *At the Roots of Causality* offers a sound exploration of Avicenna's ontology and aetiology, and provides a well-needed conceptual framework to situate a variety of post-Avicennian developments in the field of metaphysics. It is also able to recapture the image of a period of intense cultural vitality, with its fervent debates and its nuanced, juxtaposed viewpoints, and to return to the reader a sense of the liveliness and complexity of the Islamic philosophical tradition in its fascinating post-classical phase.