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Robert Wisnovsky, *Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context*

Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003. ix + 305 pages.

Reviewed by Mehmet Cuneyt Kaya

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Robert Wisnovsky's *Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context* is one of the most significant works written on Avicenna up until now. Wisnovsky's work can be viewed as a height of the Avicennian studies that have been developing over the last twenty years, through the editions of Avicenna's books and the secondary literature based on these editions. Wisnovsky improves upon the essential historical and methodological basis that was provided by Dimitri Gutas in his pioneering book, *Avicenna and Aristotelian Tradition*, in 1988, by using philological, historical, and philosophical tools skillfully and adding the tradition of Islamic theology to his analysis as a fundamental element.

The importance of Wisnovsky's work is not restricted to Avicenna and his philosophy; it also provides an excellent exemplar for students of Islamic/Arabic philosophy. Wisnovsky displays his superior command of philological, historical, and philosophical issues in regard to the most central and effective problems in the philosophy of Avicenna. As the title of the book indicates, another attractive aspect of the writing is that it contextualizes Avicenna's philosophy within the history of philosophy, especially in the philosophy of the late-antiquity, Islamic theology, and Islamic/Arabic philosophy. Following Gutas, Wisnovsky investigates Avicenna as an heir of Aristotelian tradition and makes this judgment more effective by using the commentary tradition in late-antiquity as an essential factor. In doing so, Wisnovsky takes pains to avoid reducing all philosophical achievements of Islamic/Arabic philosophers to the heritage of Greek philosophy and in addition, he vigorously emphasizes the impact of the indigenous Islamic theological and philosophical traditions on Avicenna.

In spite of its comprehensiveness, Wisnovsky's book is not an introductory work about Avicenna's metaphysics.

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Rather, he concentrates throughout the book on two pairs of related questions and tries to place them within their historical and philosophical context: what is the soul and how is it related to the body as its cause, and what is God and how is He related to the world as its cause? The common point of these two pairs of questions is the notion of "cause," and Wisnovsky's work can be assessed as a history of "cause" in late-antiquity and Islamic/Arabic philosophy.

The work is divided into two parts corresponding with these questions. These two parts also indicate two contexts within which Wisnovsky evaluates Avicenna's philosophy. In Part I, "Avicenna and the Ammonian Synthesis," Wisnovsky begins by examining the history of Aristotelian *entelekheia*, which Aristotle used in his definition of soul and motion. In fact, Wisnovsky introduces two main commentary traditions on the basis of this significant concept. The first commentary tradition, which includes Peripatetic commentators, such as Alexander of Aphrodisias (fl. 205 AD) and Themistius (fl. 365 AD), focuses on proving how Aristotle's use of *entelekheia* to define the soul is consistent with his use of this term to define change and adds the term *teleiotês* ('completeness', 'endness', 'perfection') to the gloss of *entelekheia*, and therefore the essential purpose of this tradition is to reconcile Aristotle with Aristotle himself and to form a consistent philosophical system. Wisnovsky then scrutinizes how meanings of *entelekheia* previously suggested by Peripatetic commentators are interpreted by Neoplatonist Aristotle commentators, from Syrianus (d. ca. 437 AD) to Philoponus (d. ca. 570 AD)—but the central figure in this commentary tradition was Ammonius (d. ca. 521 AD)—and adopted by them in the Neoplatonic philosophy. The second commentary tradition that aims to reconcile Plato with Aristotle, Wisnovsky calls the "Ammonian synthesis" that culminated with Arabic translations of Greek philosophical heritage in the eighth through the tenth centuries and reached its peak in the philosophy of Avicenna. In the rest of the chapter, Wisnovsky analyzes in detail the philological, historical,

and philosophical implications of Avicenna's answer to the first question—that is the question of the soul—in the context of Ammonian synthesis. In the case of the effect of Neoplatonist philosophy on the Islamic world, Wisnovsky's strong emphasis on "Ammonian synthesis" directs the attention of the students of Islamic/Arabic philosophy to the commentary tradition of the late-antiquity, rather than to so-called *Theology of Aristotle* (*Uthûlûjiyâ Aristûtâlis*) and consequently to Plotinus's *Enneads*.

Wisnovsky tries to find the answer to what God is and how He is related to the world as its cause in Part II, "The Beginning of the Avicennian Synthesis," where he focuses on the two well-known distinctions of Avicenna, namely the distinction between essence (*mâhiyyâ*) and existence (*wujûd*), and the distinction between necessary existence in itself (*wâjib al-wujûd bi-dhâtihî*) and necessary existence through another / possible existence in itself (*wâjib al-wujûd bi-ghayrihî / mumkin al-wujûd bi-dhâtihî*). The picture that Wisnovsky draws in regard to the context and background of these distinctions is a real eye-opener for scholars and researchers. The correlation that Wisnovsky establishes between Islamic theology and philosophy gives the book a unique character. The last point constitutes also the second context that Wisnovsky suggests to understand the philosophy of Avicenna thoroughly. Here, he finds the immediate influences on Avicenna's essence / existence and necessary in itself / necessary through another distinction in the works of Muslim theologians, namely the *mutakallimûn*, particularly in the works of Ash'arite and Mâturîdite theologians, instead of earlier Greek sources. More specifically, according to Wisnovsky, the origin of Avicenna's first distinction is the theological debates about the relation between "thing" (*shay*) and "existent" (*wujûd*) in the Islamic world. Similarly, for Wisnovsky, theological discussions on God's relation to His eternal attributes are the foremost sources of Avicenna's distinction between necessary in itself / necessary through another, but he also indicates the terminological contributions of al-Fârâbî and

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al-Âmirî besides the Arabic translators of Greek and Syriac philosophical texts to this distinction.

All these features of Wisnovsky's well-researched and lucidly written book make it a welcome addition to Avicennian studies. In view of the fact that a comprehensive study on the correlation between Islamic/Arabic philosophy and Islamic theology, has not been done before, Wisnovsky's book is indispensable for students of Islamic/Arabic philosophy. This is a must-read book for all those who study Avicenna, and is also useful to those interested in Islamic/Arabic philosophy or the history of philosophy in general.