

The Residual of Reality

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The Semantic and Ontological Status of Contingency in the Early Avicennized Tradition

This contribution aims to analyse the debates on the semantic and ontological status of contingency (*imkān*) in the early period of Avicennized Islamic thought (XI-XIII c.), focusing on four key figures, i.e., Avicenna himself, Bahmanyār, al-Ġazālī, and Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī.

Contingency can be described as the sum of the possibility of existence and the possibility of non-existence (where “possibility” is to be understood as the contradictory of impossibility). The Avicennian tradition conceives contingency as an external, necessarily concomitant property of contingent quiddities. The issue of the semantic status of contingency the whether that property is positive or negative (i.e., whether its notion includes a negation). The issue of ontological status concerns whether contingency is extramentally real or not. The two questions are distinct but related, as this presentation will try and highlight.

These questions are particularly consequential for the Islamic philosophical tradition. A crucial example of their importance concerns the hotly debated question of the eternity of the world. Indeed, were contingency something real and positively existent, it would need an existent subject of inherence, implying that there could not be a time when the world as a whole is both non-existent and possibly existent.

Avicenna defends realism and “positivism” about contingency: contingency is an extramentally real, positive property. That being said, debates presented in the *Mubāḥaṭāt* and in Bahmanyār’s *Taḥṣīl* show Avicenna and his circle acutely aware of certain problems entailed by this position (e.g., the self-predication of contingency).

al-Ġazālī formulates a conceptualist counterpoint to Avicenna’s doctrine: contingency is a purely mental item stemming from a conceptual operation the intellect. al-Ġazālī’s approach to the issue is polemical in tone and narrow in scope, being focused on refuting the Avicennian reasoning for the eternity of the world.

Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī offers a comprehensive, non-polemical discussion of the matter, considering a wide array of arguments *pro* and *contra* the Avicennian doctrine. Ultimately, he settles on a position which may be called “negativism”. Contingency is the pure absence of something, i.e., the absence of any relation of entailment between quiddity and existence (or non-existence). The presentation will highlight the differences between Ġazālīan conceptualism and Rāzīan negativism, as well as the reasons behind Rāzī’s dismissal of conceptualism.