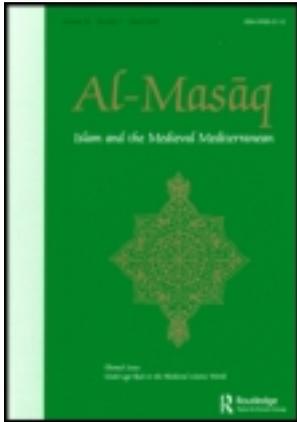


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### Chance and Determinism in Avicenna and Averroes

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languages, that remain untranslated in the text. In an admirable work of publishing, Pourjavady has included even snippets of coloured Arabic text (p. 45), yet scholars who work on other regions and might not know Arabic at all will not be able to understand a few key points that centre on the quoted Arabic. This is perhaps only disappointing because Pourjavady's ideas are so accessibly written and concisely presented that a broader readership would benefit from learning about the ideas and debates during this transitional period.

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### **Chance and Determinism in Avicenna and Averroes**

CATARINA BELO, 2007

[Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science. Texts and Studies, 69]

Leiden and Boston: Brill

xii + 252 pp.

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In *Chance and Determinism*, Belo presents some pertinent topics from Avicenna's and Averroes' philosophy with great clarity and shrewdness. She states in her introduction that "the three themes of chance, matter and providence are treated [...] with the aim of achieving a comprehensive overview of their metaphysics and physics with reference to the issue of determinism", and this is indeed exactly what the book offers. The book is divided into a part dealing with Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) (Ibn Sīnā, d. 1037) and a part dealing with Averroes (Ibn Rushd) (Ibn Rushd, d. 1198). Both parts are further divided into a chapter introducing and dealing with chance (chance in a general sense), a chapter on the relation between chance and matter (chance on a microscopic level), and a chapter on the relation between chance and celestial causation (chance on a macroscopic level).

The contents of the chapters are approximately as follows: Chapter 1 is an in-depth treatment of chapters 13 and 14 of Avicenna's *Physics of al-Shifā'*. In it, Belo argues that Avicenna thinks that a chance event is merely a coincidence, which can be traced back to a necessary cause. "Chance is for Avicenna an accident of the final cause, with the result that chance is a subjective cause tied up with the intentions of the agent" (p. 32), Belo concludes. Even though one can find a translation of these chapters in McGinnis' translation of the *Physics of al-Shifā'*, Belo's account is very insightful and does not stop at the level of mere paraphrase but shows what exactly the issue is and which solutions Avicenna offers. In chapter 2, she argues (explicitly against Ivry) that matter does not have any active power itself. She even goes so far as to conclude that for Avicenna, "matter is an entity that must be assumed for the sake of the system but has no intrinsic, independent reality" (p. 87). Moreover, she draws from many different books of Avicenna's, though *al-Ishārāt wa-l-Tanbīhāt* is especially underrepresented and the coherence and unity of Avicenna's corpus is assumed, not discussed. Chapter 3 deals with

celestial causation. She presents a fairly standard account of this, mainly drawing from the *Metaphysics of al-Shifā'*. Her treatment of providence and al-qaḍā' wa-l-qadar at the end of the chapter is particularly noteworthy. Chapter 4 is an insightful discussion of Averroes' *Long Commentary on the Physics*, more specifically on the passage of Aristotle's *Physics II* (195b31–200b8). Chapter 5 shows that Averroes' idea of matter is close to Avicenna's (she draws from a variety of sources). Especially her discussion on how the meanings of necessary and possible beings are different for Avicenna and Averroes is very interesting. In chapter 6, Belo discusses an evolution in Averroes' thought on celestial causation. In his earlier works he agreed with Avicenna, in his later works he emphasises God's creation of all effects (according to Belo after due consideration of al-Ghazzālī's critique).

One should be aware of the book's strengths and weaknesses. The book does a great job of conveying Avicenna's and Averroes' philosophical arguments, but the comparative and/or historical analysis doesn't go very far beyond the comparison between these two philosophers. Even though Belo herself concludes in chapter 4 that "this chapter has discussed Averroes' views on chance, and his position vis-à-vis other philosophers and commentators" (p. 156), the chapter, in fact, only deals with the "other philosophers and commentators" inasmuch as Averroes treats them, and she does not even identify these philosophers beyond the identification Averroes offers. Readers looking for such a comparative study may therefore be disappointed with this book, but I would argue that in fact it makes the book stronger. Even in terms of Aristotle's view (the principal philosopher she relates both Avicenna's and Averroes' ideas to throughout the book), Belo admits that she doesn't want to go into too much detail "because what Aristotle exactly meant has itself been the object of controversy [...] for centuries if not millennia" (p. 121). A treatment of the views of other philosophers that would do justice to them would therefore take up too much space and would distract from Belo's main objective: explaining Avicenna's and Averroes' views.

This issue becomes problematic when Belo concludes that Avicenna "combines deterministic trends of Aristotelian philosophy with strict predestinarian doctrines which are present in some Islamic theological and legal schools" (p. 120). Though she aptly shows how Aristotelian philosophy contributes to Avicenna's determinism, her sole (unannotated) argument for a connection with 'Islamic theological and legal schools' is Avicenna's use of "a predestinarian ḥadīth from the collection of Ibn Ḥanbal" (p. 116). Likewise, her concluding remark (not backed up by any specific argument) at the end of her study that Avicenna's and Averroes' determinism "contributes to a certain fatalism in Muslim thought and society" (p. 232) stands in shrill contrast with her well thought-out and rigorous analyses in the main parts of her book.

Students who have hitherto occupied themselves with Avicenna's and Averroes' metaphysics will gain a lot from this study, as Belo fills in blanks that are notably present in, for example, Avicenna's *Metaphysics of al-Shifā'*. Undoubtedly, for scholars of Avicenna and Averroes alike, this book is a mandatory read.

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