

## Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context

*Robert Wisnovsky*

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#8952916 in Books 2003-10Original language:English 9.50 x 6.25 x 1.25l, #File Name: 0715632213320 pages | File size: 49.Mb

**Robert Wisnovsky : Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context:

15 of 16 people found the following review helpful. A profound study of a profound mindBy Philip JeyaratnamAvicenna (a Latinised version of Ibn Sina) was born in 980 A.D. in Central Asia. He died in 1037 in Persia. A child prodigy who memorised the Koran by age 10, Ibn Sina also taught himself medicine and treated patients as a teenager. Arguably the greatest mind of Islamic civilisation, his intellectual achievements stand out all the more when you examine the context of his prodigious output. He produced about 450 works on philosophy, medicine, psychology, to name a few areas. Wisnovsky, an accomplished historian of philosophy and classical Arabist, has provided a precise and painstaking study of Avicenna's philosophy in context. The 'contextualism' championed by Wisnovsky, which owes a debt to the pioneering work of the philosopher of science, AI Sabra, seeks to recreate the situation and context in which Avicenna's ideas were generated. Wisnovsky has mastered a difficult topic and rendered the work of a complex mind with aplomb. He eschews reductionism (simplifying stuff) or precursorism (glorifying achievements) to produce a balanced, sympathetic but level-headed study of the work of a great Islamic and world thinker. Wisnovsky writes well, but the subject matter is heavy-going. Not for the lay reader but certainly very useful for students of the subject, whether professional or the garden variety, like myself. I look forward to future works of Wisnovsky.

An analysis of the sources and evolution of the metaphysics of Abu Ali ibn Sina (d. 1037 AD) -- known in the West by his Latinized name Avicenna -- this book focuses on the answers Avicenna and his predecessors gave to two

fundamental questions: what is the soul and how does it cause the body? and what is God and how does He cause the world? To respond to these challenges Avicenna invented new concepts and distinctions and reinterpreted old ones. The author concludes that Avicenna's innovations are a turning point in the history of metaphysics. Avicenna's metaphysics is the culmination of one period of synthesis, during which philosophers fused together the Neoplatonic project of reconciling Plato with Aristotle, with the Peripatetic project of reconciling Aristotle with himself. Yet Avicenna also stands at the beginning of another period of synthesis, during which philosophers sought to integrate the Arabic version of the earlier synthesis with Islamic doctrinal theology (kalam). Avicenna's metaphysics significantly influenced European scholastic thought, but it had an even more profound impact on Islamic intellectual history, where the philosophical problems and opportunities associated with the Avicennian synthesis were to be debated up to the end of the 19th century.

"Wisnovsky's approach epitomizes what I see as the three most fruitful avenues for the study of the first few centuries of Arabic philosophy: taking late-antique thought (especially the commentators) into account and being attentive to details of the Arabic translations of philosophical works rather than imagining Avicenna and others as engaging directly with Greek sources. Wisnovsky's outstanding book should serve as a model for future research on Avicenna, and on the formative period of Arabic philosophy in general."Peter Adamson, King's College London, *The Classical* 54/2 (2004)"Wisnovsky's effort, then, is a resounding success. His study will provide specialists with years' worth of materials to mine and digest, while newcomers are treated to a challenging yet thoroughly engaging introduction to the central metaphysical issues being discussed in late ancient philosophy and the first bloom of Arabic thought. Wisnovsky's book represents the state of the art; it comes highly recommended to anyone interested in the interface between ancient and medieval thought."Taneli Kukkonen, University of Victoria, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 43/1 (2005)"Robert Wisnovsky's *Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context* is arguably one of the most important works to come out on Avicenna to date. Wisnovsky has a superb mastery of the philological, historical, and philosophical tools necessary for tackling some of the most central and deepest issues in Avicenna's philosophy. His study is history of ideas done at its best. The work is must reading for anyone studying Avicenna today and likewise will be of interest to those with broader interests, whether in Arabic philosophy and intellectual history, Hellenistic and Neoplatonic studies, medieval Latin philosophy, or the history of philosophy in general."Jon McGinnis, University of MissouriSt Louis, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 124:2 (2004)"Robert Wisnovsky's judgments in *Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context* are based on a keen critical sense and sound knowledge of all the relevant texts, Greek and Arabic alike. The combination of historical and philological accuracy and philosophical insight make this book relatively rare among its kind in Arabic philosophy. Wisnovsky belongs to a new generation of scholars of Arabic philosophy who approach the subject with the seriousness, diligence, and expertise it deserves."Dimitri Gutas, Yale University"Robert Wisnovsky has tackled some of the most central and controversial issues involved in the interpretation of Avicenna's philosophy. The result is an original, illuminating, and extremely lucid exposition of Avicenna's views and how he arrived at them."Everett Rowson, University of PennsylvaniaAbout the AuthorRobert Wisnovsky is Associate Professor of Islamic Intellectual History in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Harvard University.