

Ross, A. & Vázquez, D. (2023). *Cause and Explanation in Ancient Philosophy*. Routledge. 258 pp.

In *Cause and Explanation in Ancient Philosophy*, the editors, Daniel Vázquez and Alberto Ross Hernández, renowned experts in Stoicism and Aristotelianism respectively, have curated a masterful and illuminating volume that delves into the intricate and often elusive nature of causality. This meticulously researched and thoughtfully curated collection of essays represents a significant contribution to the field, offering a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of how ancient thinkers grappled with the fundamental questions of cause and explanation. The fact that both cause and explanation are linked is no accident: the authors understand that the philosophical pedigree of both concepts is inextricably interrelated, and it is a novel way to start the discussion that avoids modern preconceptions and criticisms of the notion of cause. This becomes apparent as we read the contributions in the volume. The editors' expertise and passion for the contrasting aspects of *aitia* ("cause") emerge through every page; they seamlessly put together a diverse array of perspectives from leading scholars in ancient philosophy that clarify different issues directly or indirectly related to the concept of cause.

The book opens with a comprehensive introduction by Ross, which sets the stage for the chapters to follow by providing a broad overview of the key themes and debates surrounding causality in ancient thought. They outline the historical context and intellectual landscape of the debate, highlighting the diverse approaches and competing theories that emerged across different philosophical schools and traditions. One of the initial important insights pertains to the early meaning of *aitia* as a sort of "responsibility" that does not necessarily imply an agent in the modern sense. Vázquez, with his deep knowledge of Platonism, Stoicism, and ancient Scepticism, brings a unique perspective to the discussion, illuminating the Stoic emphasis on fate and determinism. Ross, an expert in Aristotelianism, offers valuable insights into Aristotle's complex and influential theory of four causes. They write, "The study of ancient views on causation is not merely an exercise in historical scholarship; it is also a source of inspiration and critical reflection for contemporary philosophers" (p. 3). *Cause and Explanation in Ancient Philosophy* thus offers a refreshing and insightful exploration of the complex and multifaceted concept of *aitia* in ancient thought.

From the early Greek philosophers to Aristotle, Stoicism, and even Islamic philosophy, the book navigates through the diverse landscape of ancient thought, offering a comprehensive and engaging examination of this fundamental concept. While primarily focused on the philological and conceptual aspects of *aitia*, the book also addresses the broader metaphysical, epistemological, and logical implications of the concept.

This volume, *Cause and Explanation in Ancient Philosophy*, undertakes a meticulous exploration of the multifaceted concept of *aitia* within the intellectual landscape of antiquity. As Alberto Ross aptly states in the introduction, “The diverse uses and nuances of *aitia* make this concept one of the most controversial and challenging in ancient philosophy” (p. 3). By engaging with diverse philosophical and philological perspectives, the book aims to illuminate the nuanced applications, variations, and implications of this term, fostering a deeper understanding of its significance in ancient thought. Ross, in his introduction, masterfully sets the stage by highlighting the complexity and richness of *aitia*, underscoring the challenges and controversies it has generated throughout the history of philosophy. He provides a concise overview of the book’s structure and content, effectively whetting the reader’s appetite for the intellectual journey that lies ahead.

The initial chapter, authored by David LévyStone, delves into the etymological and conceptual origins of *aitios*. LévyStone meticulously traces its evolution and diverse applications in the ancient Greek language, illuminating the nuanced relationship between *aitia* and the notions of responsibility and accountability. As he states, “The original meaning of *aitios* is closely related to the idea of responsibility and accountability” (p. 8). This reinterpretation is grounded in a rigorous analysis of Homeric texts, where *aitios* appears exclusively in masculine or feminine forms, devoid of any neuter or substantive *aitia* counterparts. Furthermore, the syntactical patterns associated with *aitios* in these texts, particularly the absence of genitive constructions and the presence of dative personal relations, underscore its subjective and moral dimension. LévyStone’s analysis provides a solid foundation for understanding the concept’s broader philosophical implications.

The second chapter, penned by Mary Margaret McCabe (affectionately known as MM by students and colleagues), offers a captivating exploration of Plato’s enigmatic Form of the Good. MM McCabe examines its role as the ultimate cause and explanatory principle in Plato’s metaphysical system. She eloquently asserts, “The

Form of the Good is not merely a cause among others; it is the ultimate source and explanation of all reality and value" (p. 25). With her characteristic insightful and witty style, she guides the readers through the complexities of Plato's thought, illuminating the Form's unique status and its profound implications for understanding the nature of reality and the pursuit of knowledge.

Chapter 3, co-authored by Saloni de Souza and Daniel Vázquez, is entitled "That's What Makes the World Go Round: Causation in the Myth in the *Statesman*." De Souza and Vázquez provide a fascinating analysis of the causal dynamics at play in the myth of the *Statesman*. Their interpretation reveals a complex interplay of divine and natural forces, underscoring the cyclical nature of causation and its implications for understanding the relationship between human agency and cosmic order. As they aptly state, "The myth in the *Statesman* presents a cyclical model of causation, where divine and natural forces interact to shape the course of the cosmos and human history" (p. 48).

Viktor Ilievski, in "Chance, Necessity, and Demiurgic Causation in the *Timaeus*," takes us back to the study of Plato. Ilievski offers a compelling examination of the causal framework presented in Plato's *Timaeus*. He explores the interplay of chance, necessity, and the Demiurge's creative activity, highlighting the teleological and rational underpinnings of the cosmos. He argues, "The Demiurge in the *Timaeus* acts as an intelligent and benevolent cause, shaping the cosmos according to a pre-existing model of perfection" (p. 72).

Alberto Ross returns in chapter 5 with "Cause and Explanation in Aristotle: *Logos*, *Eidos*, and *Tropos*." Ross provides a lucid and insightful exposition of Aristotle's four causes, elucidating their distinct roles and interconnections in explaining natural phenomena. He also explores the significance of *logos*, *eidos*, and *tropos* in Aristotle's causal framework, offering a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of his approach to causation and explanation. He remarks that "Aristotle's four causes provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the various aspects and levels of causation in the natural world" (p. 96).

Cristina Viano, in "Aristotle with Prime Matter," delves into the intricate concept of prime matter in Aristotle's metaphysics, examining its role as the underlying substratum of all material change and its relationship to the four causes. She states, "Prime matter in Aristotle's system represents the ultimate potentiality for receiving form and becoming actualised" (p. 115).

José María Llovet, in “Aristotle on the Efficiency of Accidental Causes,” tackles the challenging issue of accidental causation in Aristotle’s philosophy. He argues persuasively for the genuine causal efficacy of accidental causes, demonstrating their significance in understanding the complexities of the natural world. He asserts, “Accidental causes in Aristotle’s system can have genuine causal efficacy, contributing to the production of effects even though they are not part of the essential nature of things” (p. 132).

María-Elena García-Peláez, in “The Relevance of Environmental Conditions as Causes for Animal Generation in Aristotle,” provides a compelling analysis of Aristotle’s understanding of the causal role of environmental conditions in animal generation. She highlights the dynamic interplay between internal predispositions and external influences, offering a nuanced perspective on Aristotle’s approach to biological causation. She observes, “Aristotle recognises the crucial role of environmental conditions in shaping the development and characteristics of animals, emphasising the interplay between internal and external factors in the process of generation” (p. 152).

Carlo Natali, in “Aristotle’s Causes and the Problem of the Necessity of Our Actions,” delves into the complex relationship between Aristotle’s causal framework and the problem of human free will. He explores how Aristotle’s notion of final cause can accommodate human agency without undermining the causal necessity that governs the natural world. He argues, “Aristotle’s account of causation, particularly his notion of final cause, provides a framework for understanding human agency and reconciling it with the broader causal structure of the natural world” (p. 175).

Daniel Vázquez comes back in “Theories of Causation in Early Stoicism,” where he offers a comprehensive overview of the Stoic approach to causation, highlighting its distinctive features and its implications for understanding the relationship between fate, free will, and moral responsibility. He emphasises, “The Stoics developed a sophisticated theory of causation that emphasised the interconnectedness of all things and the role of divine reason in governing the cosmos” (p. 192).

Michael Chase, in “The Scientific Epistemology of al-Nazzām,” explores the contributions of the Islamic philosopher al-Nazzām to the understanding of causation and scientific inquiry. He highlights al-Nazzām’s emphasis on empirical observation and rational analysis,

showcasing the rich intellectual tradition of Islamic philosophy. Chase points out that “Al-Nazzām’s epistemology of science emphasises the importance of empirical observation and rational inference in uncovering the causal structures of the natural world” (p. 214).

Finally, Luis Xavier López-Farjeat, in “Recovering Causality? Ibn Taymiyya on the Creation of the World,” examines the theological perspective on causation offered by the Islamic theologian Ibn Taymiyya. He explores how Ibn Taymiyya’s emphasis on divine omnipotence shapes his understanding of the relationship between God and the created world. López-Farjeat argues, “Ibn Taymiyya’s theological approach to causation emphasises the absolute power and sovereignty of God as the ultimate source and sustainer of all existence” (p. 230).

In sum, *Cause and Explanation in Ancient Philosophy* offers a comprehensive and erudite exploration of a central concept in ancient thought. Through meticulous textual analysis, historical contextualisation, and critical engagement with diverse interpretive traditions, this volume provides an invaluable resource for scholars and students seeking a deeper understanding of the rich and complex tapestry of ancient philosophical reflections on causality and explanation.

While the chapters on al-Nazzām and Ibn Taymiyya offer fascinating insights into Islamic perspectives on causation, their inclusion feels somewhat incongruous within the broader context of the collection. The book primarily focuses on ancient Greek and Hellenistic philosophy, with a strong emphasis on Aristotle and his intellectual lineage. Although the Islamic thinkers undoubtedly engaged with and were influenced by ancient Greek thought, their inclusion without a more explicit bridge or contextualisation creates a sense of discontinuity within the general framework of the book. A more comprehensive introduction or a separate section dedicated to the reception and transformation of ancient ideas in Islamic philosophy could have provided a smoother transition and a more cohesive reading experience.

Despite that minor criticism, *Cause and Explanation in Ancient Philosophy* is an indispensable resource for anyone interested in the history of philosophy, metaphysics, and the philosophy of science. The book’s in-depth analysis, innovative interpretations, and comprehensive scope make it a valuable contribution to the field, providing a rich and stimulating exploration of the concept of *aitia* and its profound implications for understanding the nature of reality and the pursuit of knowledge. Thus, *Cause and Explanation in Ancient Philosophy* serves

as a valuable bridge between ancient philosophical inquiries and contemporary analytical philosophy's ongoing discussions on causation and explanation. By delving into the diverse approaches of ancient thinkers, the book provides a historical and conceptual foundation for understanding the evolution of these fundamental concepts. This historical perspective is crucial for contemporary philosophers as it reveals the roots of current debates and offers alternative frameworks for thinking about causation and explanation. The nuanced analyses of ancient views on agency, necessity, and chance offer valuable insights for current debates on free will and determinism. Furthermore, the book's emphasis on the interconnectedness of metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical dimensions of causation aligns with contemporary analytical philosophy's holistic approach to understanding this complex phenomenon.

Cause and Explanation in Ancient Philosophy is, therefore, an essential addition to any philosophical library. It is a testament to the enduring relevance of ancient thought and a valuable resource for anyone seeking to deepen their understanding of causality. Vázquez and Ross are to be commended for their outstanding editorial work and their contribution to the ongoing conversation about one of philosophy's most fundamental questions. The editors' expertise and passion for the subject matter shine through on every page, as they seamlessly weave together a diverse array of perspectives from leading scholars in ancient philosophy. Vázquez, with his deep knowledge of Stoicism, brings a unique perspective to the discussion, illuminating the Stoic emphasis on fate and determinism. Ross, an expert in Aristotelianism, offers valuable insights into Aristotle's complex and influential theory of four causes. Finally, throughout the book, the authors consistently demonstrate a deep appreciation for the richness and complexity of ancient thought. They approach their subject matter with both scholarly rigour and philosophical sensitivity. The book's extensive footnotes and bibliography provide a wealth of resources for further exploration, making it an invaluable tool for both students and scholars of ancient philosophy.

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