ATTRIBUTING CAUSALITY TO GOD’S LAW:
THE SOLUTION OF FAHR AD-DIN AR-RAZI

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The complex relationship of theology to religious law is illuminatingly displayed when the legal theory that legitimizes the law-finding process is at odds with the theological doctrine underlying the legal system as a whole. One such telling instance in medieval Islam is found in the work of the Šāfiʿī jurist and Ašʿarī theologian Fahār ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī (d. 606/1210). In his work on legal theory, al-Mahṣūl fī ʿilm usūl al-fiqh, ar-Rāzī discusses the existence of causal relationships in God’s law. The discussion of causality was prompted by a conflux of factors, many of which will be touched on in due course. In what follows, I will focus not on the contextual origins but on the intellectual challenges that theological positions on causality posed for Islamic jurisprudents and how ar-Rāzī resolved them in a manner acceptable to jurists of all theological persuasions.

Causality in Theology and Law

The question of causality is an old one in Muslim intellectual history. Most of the discourse on causality occurred in the fields of theology and philosophy, of which the former is of particular interest here due to its influence on the articulation of legal theory.¹ The terms that theologians used for ‘cause’ were either ʿilla or sabab and derivations of these words. While most preferred the term sabab, which denotes occasion more than cause, some authors used the terms interchangeably. The prevalence of using either of these terms also depends on the historical period under investigation; after al-Ġazālī (d. 505/1111), the term ʿilla is more frequently found than sabab, and later Ibn Ḩaldūn

¹ One need not forget that most medieval scholars were well-versed in both theology and law.
(d. 808/1406), as-Sanūsī (d. 895/1490), and al-Bāghūrī (d. 1276/1860) tend toward the term *sabab* again.²

Why was causality so avidly discussed in Muslim theology? The main reason was that, logically, a cause induces its effect (*musabbab, maʿlūl*). As Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037) said, “everything which is a cause of an existence different than itself becomes… an efficient cause.”³ The efficacy (*taʾtīr*) of the cause on the effect establishes a necessary link between them, a view voiced, for instance, by the Brethren of Purity.⁴ Without an impeding factor, the cause cannot exist without its effect and this effect cannot exist without its cause. The necessary and reciprocal relationship between cause and effect prompted philosophers, such as Ibn Sīnā, to argue, for example, for the eternity of the existence of the world.⁵ The acceptance of a necessary, determining relationship between cause and effect implies, however, an intrinsic causal relation that is not directly dependent on God’s agency. It, thus, compromises God’s omnipotence and His free will, and it questions God as the sole Creator.

While hardly any religious scholar, regardless of his theological persuasion, would deny that, in the final analysis, God is the sole Cause and Creator of everything,⁶ theologians debated the question whether a causal relationship exists outside of God’s direct interference. This debate covered questions ranging from the existence of natural laws of cause and effect to that of human efficacy and responsibility for his/her acts. Does fire cause burning? Is the human being the causal agent of his/her act and, hence, is s/he responsible for it?

Some theologians⁷ accepted necessary causal relations apart from God’s immediate creative will. Muʿtazilī scholars generally accepted

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⁴ EI2, s.v. “ʿIlā,” vol. 3, 1129 and 1131.

⁵ Marmura, “Efficient Causality in Avicenna,” 175.


⁷ Since this paper is concerned with law rather than theology, it cannot go into detail about the various positions held by scholars belonging to one school of thought.