

Robert Kilwardby (1215-1279) is an advocate of the principle of ontological hierarchy. According to this principle things of a lower ontological level cannot act on things of a higher ontological level. Advocating such a principle poses a problem for his theory of sense perception: how can the sensitive soul perceive external material objects, since material objects cannot act on it?

The aim of my talk is to address this problem by defending the claim that one should interpret “acting on” in terms of efficient causation. Differently put, my solution to solving this problem is to show that the principle needs to be reformulated in order to work at the level of sense perception. In the context of sense perception one must understand the principle not as the lower cannot act on the higher, but as the lower cannot efficiently cause a change in the higher. I base my reading of the principle on a distinction Kilwardby introduces in his *De spiritu fantastico* 117, between proper and accidental efficient causation. The sensitive soul is the proper efficient cause of sense perception because it is the one actually causing the perception, and the external object is only the accidental efficient cause of perception since it only changes the sense organ, occasioning the actual perception. If this reading is correct, things of a lower ontological degree can be said to act on things of a higher ontological degree, if and only if the efficient change they cause is necessary for the cause elicited by the thing of a higher ontological degree. Such a reading allows Kilwardby to keep the principle of ontological hierarchy, and to dodge the abovementioned epistemological problem.