

Aristotle and the Abrahamic Faiths on the Eternity of the World

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The Greek philosopher Aristotle has had a tremendous impact on thought throughout history. His treatises and theories did not remain in ancient Greece but survived in the minds of countless intellectuals. Through reading his works, many of the world's greatest minds came to believe in Aristotle's flawlessness. Others, however, quickly saw the threat that Aristotle posed to their religious outlook of the universe and reality. Many of Aristotle's ideas were highly controversial; one of those ideas is his assertion that the world was eternal. This idea was in contrast to the doctrine of the creation of the world by God that was held by Muslims, Jews, and Christians. Over the centuries, philosophers were forced to reconcile the Philosopher's theory of the eternity of the world with their own religious beliefs. Each went through this process in a somewhat different way. However, the extent to which they influenced each other is evident in the similarities of their theories as well as in their efforts to disprove previous theories of other intellectuals.

Aristotle is regarded as one of the greatest philosophers in human history. During his lifetime between 384 and 322 BCE, he created his own philosophical school called the Lyceum, and he completed many works which covered topics such as logic, physics, metaphysics, politics, ethics, the soul, and nature. His work was first transmitted into the Semitic world by Syriac-speaking Christians who lived in or near Byzantium. They translated his work from Greek into Syriac first and then into Arabic or directly into Arabic.¹ However, most of Aristotle's writings were either unknown or ignored by the Christian West until many centuries later.²

By the ninth century the Muslim world had created a distinct intellectual tradition, and Aristotle played a large role in that tradition. Muslim philosophers "attempted to assimilate the Greek philosophical tradition as they knew it and to formulate a conception of Islam as a religion in philosophical terms."³ The most notable of these philosophers were al-Kindi, al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, al-Ghazali, and Ibn Rushd. However, "this incorporation of Aristotle into the 'house of Islam' did not pass unchallenged, and at times the Islamic opposition to Aristotelian philosophy was quite strong."⁴ The world of these Muslim scholars influenced the philosophical traditions of Judaism and Christianity for centuries to come.

In the Middle Ages, the majority of Jews was living in the Muslim world and spoke Arabic. "The Arabic translations of Aristotle eventually became a part of the Jewish philosophical tradition, which, although small, comprised a continuous series of notable thinkers throughout the Middle Ages."⁵ Jewish philosophers such as Maimonides, Albalag, Narboni, Ibn Daud, Gerson, and Crescas used not only translations of Aristotle but "Jews became familiar with the teachings of Aristotle, at times interspersed with neo-Platonic doctrines, through the summaries, commentaries, and independent works of... Islamic philosophers."⁶ The works of these Jewish intellectuals, along with the Muslim works, influenced the way Christians dealt with Aristotle and their reconciliation of him Christianity.

Western Christendom had access to Aristotle during the Middle of the first millennium, but his theories were not popular until another five hundred years. "In the sixth century the Roman writer and civil servant Boethius translated some of Aristotle's logical treatises into Latin; but these first fruits were to be the only works of Aristotle available in the Latin world until the late twelfth century."⁷ When Aristotle's works were first translated from Arabic to Latin, they were usually accompanied by commentaries of Islamic and Jewish philosophers. Later Latin translations were made directly from the Greek, although these were less common until the fifteenth century. Aquinas is the most highly regarded Christian Aristotelian. His goals were "to do for the Christian world what Maimonides and Ibn Rushd had tried to do for their coreligionists: establish a philosophical interpretation of the religious beliefs of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam within the general conceptual framework of Aristotle's philosophy."⁸ Although there were many aspects of Aristotle's thinking that the three religions readily accepted, such as his

¹ Mircea Eliade (ed.), "Aristotelianism," *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ "Aristotle," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Encyclopaedia Judaica, 1972).

⁷ Eliade.

⁸ Ibid.

development of logic, strong opposition to Aristotle and his theories, which did not always support or agree with Abrahamic tradition and thought, sometimes arose.

Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thinkers found differences in the teachings of their own religions and Aristotle on the concepts of God and the world. Aristotle's Supreme Being was a God that did not take part in creation or the lives of humans. "Aristotle's God had not created the eternal universe and would not destroy it; his sole function was just to get things moving. God took no interest in the fate of human beings".⁹ This Unmoved Mover set the world in motion, but it was not personal. Because the Unmoved Mover merely set the universe in motion and did not create anything, Aristotle held that the world was eternal. "The World in Aristotle's system is finite in Space but infinite in Time."¹⁰ Aristotle asserted theories that were in direct opposition to Abrahamic tradition that taught of an all-powerful, personal, creator-God. Also, Aristotle asserted that this eternal world was not set into motion by the will of God, its motion was a necessary effect of God. Religious theologians found these theories to be very deterministic and limiting. However, because Aristotle was so highly regarded, his concepts of the world and God could not simply be ignored but had to be either adapted to Abrahamic theology or rejected completely as flaws in the great philosopher's thinking. Of course, many intellectuals attempted the former.

Each individual philosopher reconciled Aristotle's concept of the eternity of the world differently with his own religion. Al-Kindi (803-873 CE) was one of the first Muslim philosophers to attempt to reconcile Aristotle with Islam. This reconciliation needed some modification of the traditional Aristotelian system, but in regards to the concept of the world, Al-Kindi seemed to reject Aristotle's theory completely. Al-Kindi assumed a "creation from nothing in time through a divine creator."¹¹ This assertion was completely different from Aristotle's: one assumes a creator and a creation from nothing and the other assumes a mover and a moved form that is as eternal as the mover. Al-Kindi's theory also is in contrast to Aristotle's idea of time and eternity. "Al-Kindi's argument can be reduced to the assertion that there cannot be infinite time and, since time, body and movement are closely interlocked and interdependent, the world and the movement of the stars etc. must be limited in duration as well."¹² Therefore, neither the world nor creation can be eternal because nothing is eternal except God.

It is evident that even at such an early date, Al-Kindi was familiar with a Christian's work. John Philoponus was a sixth century Alexandrian Christian neo-Platonic Aristotelian philosopher, and many similarities exist between al-Kindi's and his work. One of the reasons that religious philosophers did not like Aristotle's idea of an eternal world was because it implied a limit to God's power. If God simply put the world into motion then he had no power over it or in it as he was subject to the same laws that ruled the world. Al-Kindi rejected this restricting of God and instead asserted that there was a "division between the realm of God's creative activity, *ibda*, and the world of nature which follows laws established by Aristotle."¹³ Al-Kindi's God created all and had complete authority over all unlike Aristotle's Unmoved Mover. Al-Razi (865-925 CE), the next great Islamic philosopher, held to many of Al-Kindi's ideas. He claimed that the world was created and not eternal, like Al-Kindi and in contrast to Aristotle. However, he made a small change to traditional Islamic thought: he did not believe that creation came from nothing. Instead, he asserted that "the world came into being in time whereas matter alone is eternal."¹⁴ Although he argued that matter is eternal, he still argued for the existence of God who is a creator and a director.

Many Muslim thinkers went even further from tradition and "developed a doctrine of eternal creation, whereby the universe eternally emanates from God, its first and ultimate cause."¹⁵ Al-Farabi (870-950 CE) and Ibn Sina (980-1037 CE) reconciled Aristotle and Islam in many similar ways, both in this different mode of thought. Both al-Farabi and Ibn Sina believed in "eternal creation and emanation."¹⁶ Hence, the eternity of the world was produced by an eternal creative emanation. Ibn Sina furthered this by asserting, in agreement with Aristotle, the concept of the "world being co-eternal with" God.¹⁷ They also challenged traditional Islamic teachings by arguing that the world was not directly caused by God. "According to them the world had been created not directly by God but by a hierarchy of necessary causes

⁹ C. Warren Hollister, J. Sear McGee, and Gale Stokes, *The West Transformed: A History of Western Civilization* (Fort Worth: Harcourt College Publishers, 2000), 95.

¹⁰ Masarrat Hussain Zuberi, *Aristotle, 384-322 BC and al-Ghazali 1058-1111 AD* (Karachi: Royal Book Co., 1986), 14.

¹¹ Richard Walzer, *Greek into Arabic: Essays on Islamic Philosophy*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 188.

¹² *Ibid.*, 190.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 193.

¹⁴ Zuberi, 16.

¹⁵ Eliade.

¹⁶ Walzer, 187.

¹⁷ Zuberi, 14.

starting with God and descending through the various Intelligences which moved the celestial spheres.”¹⁸ In this model, God is the first Intelligence, which creates the second, which creates the third, and so on, until the last Intelligence is created which is the active Intellect of mankind.¹⁹ Al-Farabi’s interpretation of creation and time is somewhat more complex than it seems. He argues that “the creation of the world can be an eternal one, that something can be caused without a beginning, i.e., from eternity.”²⁰ Therefore, the world was eternal yet it was also created. Al-Farabi defended Aristotle by claiming that this idea was part of Aristotle’s own and that Aristotle had, in fact, not claimed the eternity of the world without a beginning.²¹ While al-Farabi was defending Aristotle, Ibn Sina “at times surrendered, or at least reinterpreted, fundamental axioms of philosophy in favor of the religious viewpoint.”²² These men changed the way Aristotle was viewed by Muslims and many others to come.

Al-Ghazali (1058-1111 CE) another great Islamic philosopher attacked the views of al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. He asserted that God created the world, and he refuted “the eternity and incorruptibility of the world and of time and motion.”²³ His discontent with the idea that the world is everlasting was supported by his opinion that “it is inconceivable that some thing which has a beginning in time should proceed from the Eternal without there being an intermediate period.”²⁴ The world could not be both created and eternal at the same time. Furthermore, he argued that “the doctrine of emanation does not succeed in showing how the many could have proceeded from the one, or the material world from the spiritual”²⁵ in regards to divine will. To him, the theory of eternal emanation left many holes in the history of creation that the creationist theory had not. Al-Ghazali disagreed with Aristotle that the world was set in motion by God out of necessity because it limited the power of the absolute God. Instead, he claimed that “He created it when He willed it.”²⁶ Al-Ghazali was also familiar with Philoponus’ works about creation of the world from nothing.

Ibn-Rushd (1126-1198 CE) is seen as different from other Arabic philosophers even though his theories are very similar to al-Farabi’s and Ibn Sina’s. He agreed with al-Farabi and Ibn Sina in eternal creation and emanation. He attempted a reconciliation of an eternal world and the biblical concept of creation by using the notion that “nothing preceded the world but an eternal creator, namely God.”²⁷ Therefore, the universe was created, but “like its cause, [it] is eternal.”²⁸ This theory is very similar to al-Farabi’s. Like al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, he also asserted that the world was not directly created by God but by a hierarchy of necessary causes starting with God. While al-Ghazali held that God could and did act in the world, Ibn Rushd believed that the idea that God willfully acts in the world is false. “The pure Act [God] does not know the world of generation and corruption and therefore does not govern by its providence.”²⁹ Ibn Rushd was also familiar with Philoponus’ work and accredits his knowledge of Philoponus to al-Farabi. Overall, many Muslim scholars adopted the idea of eternal creation and emanation. They all found a way to keep God in the process but his role was changed for many intellectuals.

Jewish philosophers attacked the problem of Aristotle’s eternal world in a different way. Many criticized and rejected Aristotle’s eternity all together and defended biblical doctrine of creation. Others were heavily influenced by Islamic Aristotelians and incorporated the theory of eternal emanation into their own. Ibn Daud (1110?-1180? CE) rejected the Islamic assertion that God did not directly create the world and mankind. He renounced “the attempt to explain the celestial spheres and the Intelligences as emanations from God...he regards heaven and earth as immediate creations of God.”³⁰ Even though he believed that the world was created by God, he still believed that the origin of the world was beyond the understanding of man: “man [is] unable to comprehend how the world proceeded from God, every attempt

¹⁸ A.C. Crombie, *Medieval and Early Modern Science* (Garden City, NY: Double Day, 1959), 57.

¹⁹ Fernand Steenberghen, *Aristotle in the West, the Origins of Latin Aristotelianism* (Louvain: Nauwelaerts, 1970), 18.

²⁰ Carl Johannes Rautzenberg, “The Influence of Arabic Aristotelianism upon the Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas,” dissertation (University of Chicago, 1930), 138.

²¹ Zvi Cahn, *The Philosophy of Judaism: The Development of Jewish Thought Throughout the Ages, the Bible, the Talmud, the Jewish Philosophers, and the Cabala until the Present Time* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 142.

²² *Ibid.*, 142.

²³ Walzer, 191.

²⁴ Zuberi, 50.

²⁵ Cahn, 191.

²⁶ Zuberi, 50

²⁷ Rautzenberg, 137.

²⁸ Steenberghen, 19.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Cahn, 146

to penetrate this ultimate mystery of the origin of the world [is] a misuse of our powers.”³¹ This idea was borrowed by many later Jewish philosophers.

Muslim theologians greatly influenced Maimonides (1135/8-1204 CE), as many of his theories were open disagreements with the Islamic reconciliation of Aristotle and religion. Maimonides objected to the theory of eternal creation, and he compiled many proofs against the doctrine of emanation. Instead, “he advances his own theory of temporal creation,”³² a creation that occurred due to God. Maimonides not only “attempts to refute the eternity of the world so as to not disturb the Pentateuchal version of creation”³³ but he also “rejects the emanationist theory of the Muslim Aristotelians since it fails to account for the origin of matter.”³⁴ Al-Ghazali’s influence on Maimonides is evident in an argument asserted by Maimonides that the doctrine of emanation does not explain how the many could have proceeded from the one, or the material from the spiritual. Other influences include the Kalam theologians who maintained the doctrine of temporal creation like Maimonides. However, even though the Kalam proofs influenced him, he refuted their proofs of creation.³⁵ Like Ibn Daud, he finally asserted that humans are incapable of finding the truth about the origin of the world: “the question of whether the world proceeds from God in an eternal emanation, or whether it has a temporal beginning...is incapable of a solution one way or another.”³⁶ Therefore, Maimonides did allow for the possibility of an eternal world.

Maimonides belief in a temporal beginning of the world led him to be able to create theories about divine will. For example, he “links the concept of ‘free creation’ ...with the temporal beginning of the world.”³⁷ He asserted that it is out of God’s free, perfect, and divine will that the world was created, even though how and why this occurred may forever be a mystery. He claimed that the Muslim “attempt to explain the eternal procession of the world from God as an eternal activity of the divine will [hides] the opposition between a necessary consequence and a free creation.”³⁸ Therefore, since God is omnipotent and absolute, the world must have a beginning and must not be co-eternal with Him. Instead, the laws of nature do not apply to Him and everything is subordinate to Him. Because of this power, Maimonides claimed, God exerts general providence to the world and an individual providence to man.³⁹ Miracles, he claimed, are examples of God’s free will and active providence in the world. He believed that “the affirmation of the world’s eternity implied strict determinism, which rules out...the possibility of miracles. In turn, the denial of miracles implies a serious restriction on God’s omnipotence.”⁴⁰ Miracles are only possible in a world created by a divine will, and God would not be God without this absolute power.

Gerson (1288-1344 CE) another prominent Jewish philosopher, also rejected the eternity of the world and the emanationist theory. He held that “the doctrine of emanation, and its underlying idea of an eternal procession of things from God, to be self-contradictory.”⁴¹ He believed it was impossible for something to be eternal and created at the same time. However, from here his theory took a different turn: he denied the possibility of a temporal beginning to prime matter. “Matter cannot possibly have come into being...[and] cannot be derived from God.”⁴² Instead, God “produced only the new total of forms.”⁴³ Therefore, although Gerson did not agree with Islamic philosophers that the world itself or creation was eternal, he did not believe creation came out of nothing. With this assertion, Gerson separated himself from much of Jewish thought by stating that God was more like the Unmoved Mover of Aristotle’s works than Yahweh of Jewish history. He stated that “God’s act [was] limited to the unique act of creation.”⁴⁴ While matter was already in existence, God created the form of the world. God was not the cause of miracles or providence. However, he did cause the entities that control them. God created a “multiplicity of immaterial essences” and these are not only “the source of the natural order, but they are also the cause

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *E. Jud.*

³³ Cahn, 201.

³⁴ *E. Jud.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Cahn, 155.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 165.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 171

⁴⁰ Eliade.

⁴¹ Cahn, 211.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 213.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 223.

of prophecy, providence, and miracles.”⁴⁵ These essences are similar to al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and Ibn Rushd’s Intelligences and illustrate Islamic influence ever further on Gerson.

Crescas (1340-1410 CE) sought to combine the concept of creation out of nothing with that of the eternal creation of the world by God’s design and will.⁴⁶ He disagreed with Maimonides that an eternal world did not allow for a world of divine, free will. Instead, he claimed that there was “the possibility that an eternal world would also be the work of the divine will.”⁴⁷ He asserted that God was the “absolute and sole cause of the world” but believed that Gerson’s view that matter was independent of God was impossible.⁴⁸ After Crescas, there was “greater emphasis on the possibility of miracles, [and] the doctrine of temporal creation gained greater adherence.”⁴⁹ Therefore, each prominent Jewish philosopher developed his own unique theory about the creation of the world being influenced differently by Islamic intellectuals.

Of the Christian Aristotelians, none has had such a huge impact on Western thought or is so well known as St. Thomas Aquinas. Because most Christian philosophers received their information of Aristotle with Muslim and Jewish commentaries, Christian ideas are heavily influenced by previous works. Philoponus, who had such a large impact of Muslim theologians, rejected Aristotle’s ideas of the eternity of the world. Aquinas stated that “there was neither matter nor time nor movement before God created the world.”⁵⁰ He ideas came straight from Christian theology as he also asserted that the laws of nature do not apply to God’s power and, therefore, do not limit them.

Many other Christian theologians created their own ideas about Aristotle and his theory. The Latin Averroists were Christians who were highly influenced by Ibn Rushd and believed that the world emanated from God. In 1277, the Bishop of Paris, Stephen Tempier, condemned the philosophy and science thesis of Aristotle and Muslim philosophers as heretical and false because they went against the scriptural teaching of the creation of the world.⁵¹ Saint Basil believed that none of the Greek philosophers should be highly regarded since they all contradicted one another.⁵² St. Bonaventure of the thirteenth century opposed “all philosophical conceptions incompatible with Christian doctrine...eternity of the world, creation by intermediaries or progressive emanation, denial of providence.”⁵³ Instead he asserted that God is the cause of created world, and He governs it with His providence. However, St. Bonaventure did oppose the idea of creation out of nothing. The ideas of these Christian theologians illustrate the level of Muslim and Jewish influence as well as their inclination to stick to Christian doctrine.

Aquinas (1225-1274 CE) was influenced tremendously by Islamic and Muslim thinkers and most of his ideas owe credit to them. He believed that God created the world and knows when it will end. He further argued that “all finite existents, the heavenly bodies included, must be efficiently caused by a subsistent existence.”⁵⁴ Also, if a being is subsistent, then there can only be one; that one is God. However, Aquinas does not close the door on the possibility of an eternal world. Echoing al-Farabi, he believed that creation could be eternal because something can be caused without a beginning from eternity. Therefore, “the possibility of an eternal world, as a created world is probable, i.e., it is possible that something was always and yet was created by God.”⁵⁵ This idea that the world was created from eternity and that the world is later than God only according to its essences but not according to its time, is a line of development that “started with the Greek deism of Antiquity and continued though the Arabic where it was transformed...but it culminated finally in the theistic attitude of the Christian Scholastics.”⁵⁶ Maimonides’ reconciliation of Aristotle to Judaism was of great significance to Aquinas on this issue as both saw the eternity of the world as a possibility. Overall, Aquinas “inclines toward the eternity of the world rather than to the biblical conception of creation” which illustrates how important it was for Aquinas to find ways to keep Aristotle, the great and faultless philosopher compatible with Christianity.⁵⁷

⁴⁵ Ibid. 215-216.

⁴⁶ *E. Jud.*

⁴⁷ Cahn, 231.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 230.

⁴⁹ *E. Jud.*

⁵⁰ Quoted in Walzer, 192.

⁵¹ *Eliade.*

⁵² Lawrence P. Shrenk, *Aristotle in Late Antiquity* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 133.

⁵³ Steenberghen, 153.

⁵⁴ Denis Bradley, *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good: Reason and Human Happiness in Aquinas’ Moral Science* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 104.

⁵⁵ Rautzenberg, 137.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 143.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 145.

Aquinas believed that God created the world. However, this was a creation of divine will not necessity. Furthermore, Aquinas argued that “God creates and structures creation in general and the human mind in particular.”⁵⁸ Therefore, he asserted that because God was creator of all things, all things were subject to His divine providence. Miracles fall under this area of divine providence. He claimed that “a miraculous event derives immediately from the First Cause and not from created, intermediate causes.”⁵⁹ Therefore, it is God directly who causes miracles out of His divine, free will. Aquinas did not incorporate the idea of Gerson or Ibn Rushd into his own that asserted that although the world was created by God it was more created out of necessity, and God had no providence or power to act by His will in the world. Therefore, while many Christian intellectuals criticized Aristotle’s ideas, Aquinas sought desperately to embrace them, and he was helped by early religious Aristotelians.

Different individuals reconciled Aristotle differently with their own religious tradition. Full agreement between the intellectuals on how Aristotle should be adapted to religion was never attained. Muslim philosophers generally accepted the theory of eternal emanation. If something creates, then it went from potency to act. This meant that the creator was influenced by external factors. To them, God could not be affected by external factors and therefore, eternal emanation best fit His power. Jewish philosophers felt more inclined to keep with Jewish theology, and many finally decided that the truth about the reality of the world was beyond their comprehension. Christian intellectuals went both ways; some did not give Aristotle any credit and others, like St. Thomas Aquinas, praised his work. At the present, scientific proofs have shown that the world had a beginning. However, the debate continues. Did God create the world or was it a reaction of gases floating in space? Perhaps, as many Aristotelians have claimed, the answer will never be found.

⁵⁸ Bradley, 366.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 449.