

Jewish and Muslim Thinkers in the Islamic World: Three Parallels

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Our Protagonists: 9th-10th Century Iraq



Al-Kindī, d. after 870



Saadia Gaon, d. 942



Al-Rāzī d.925

Our Protagonists: 12th Century Andalusia



Ibn Ṭufayl, d.1185



Maimonides, d. 1204

1. Eternity of the Universe, part 1



Background in Greek Philosophy

- Aristotle: the universe is eternal and necessary, moved but not created by God.
- Plotinus/Neoplatonism: the universe is necessarily emanated from the One.
- John Philoponus: the universe is neither eternal nor necessary, but created. An eternal universe is in fact *impossible*.

Al-Kindī and Saadia

- Both use Philoponus' arguments without citing him by name or admitting that he contradicts Aristotle.
- Both contrast the non-eternity of the created universe to the eternity of God.

Al-Kindī



We say that the eternal is that for which non-being is absolutely impossible. With regard to existence the being of the eternal has no 'before'. The eternal does not subsist because of anything else. The eternal has no cause: the eternal has no subject, nothing predicated of it, no agent, and no explanation (that is, something for the sake of which it would exist), because there are no causes other than the ones just mentioned.

Saadia



Everything known is known only through the intermediary of the body, as we said at the outset of the book, so that if what is known transcends body and what has a bodily intermediary, there cannot be anything at all further beyond this which is known. [...] Those who seek to give Him motion, rest, wrath, delight, or anything of the sort, have in truth sought to make him a body, in terms of meaning if not in terms of expression.

Al-Kindī and Saadia against the Trinity

Al-Kindī: If the three [Persons] are species, all everlasting, and the species relates to genus as a part, but to individuals as a whole – and the genus exists in the nature of the species along with differences, while the species exists in the nature of the individuals along with accidents – [then] there is necessarily multiplicity and composition. But then the eternal is not eternal, and this is a contradiction.

Saadia: I say that I have found, on the basis of reason, a sound proof for us that He is living, powerful, and knowing, because He created things. It is innate to our intellects to accept that nothing makes without being powerful; and nothing is powerful without being alive; and nothing is made perfectly without being from something that knew how it would become made before making it. So our intellects come upon these three notions as belonging to our maker as an immediate insight and all at once.

2. Ethics as medicine

صُبْرُهُ عَلَيْهِ أَجْبَدُ دَاغٍ أَوْ سِنَّ بَرِيٍّ مَعْدَ سِيٍّ أَذْرَنْدَهُ وَبَرِيٍّ نَعْرَ أَذْرَنْدَهُ
وَبَرِيٍّ طَلِقَ أَذْرَنْدَهُ بَوَاجٍ دَاغِكُمْ وَارْدُورُ مِكْوَاةٍ مِسْمَارِيٍّ يَلَهُ أَوْ رَسْمًا أَوَّلَهُ إِنْ شَاؤَهُ



صَوْرَةُ طَبِيبٍ
وَشَكْلِ التَّ
وَصَوْرَةَ عَلَيْهِ
بَوَاجٍ دَرُ

الَّذِي يَشْفِي فِصَّ
أَغْلَجُ قُلُوكَ ذَكَرَ دَلِكُ سَرِيَّةِ دَلِكِي طَارِيَّةِ دَلِكِي غَيْرِيٍّ بَرْدَنَ أَوْ سَاعِلَاجِيٍّ بِلَادُ دَرُ

الَّذِي يَأْتِيكَ

Background in Greek Philosophy

- We frequently find Greek thinkers comparing ethics to a form of medicine, notably the Epicureans with their “four-fold remedy”.
- Aristotle compares ethics to medicine insofar as both are inexact sciences: “Matters concerned with conduct and questions of what is good for us have no fixity, any more than matters of health.”
- Galen writes in a treatise *On Character Traits*: “Just as the body is beset by illness and ugliness (for example epilepsy or, for ugliness without illness, being a hunchback), so the soul is beset by illness and ugliness. Its illness is, for instance, anger; its ugliness, for instance, ignorance.”

Al-Rāzī



Plato holds that man should, by means of bodily medicine, which is the sort of medicine that is widely recognized, and spiritual medicine, which is achieved by means of proofs and demonstrations, give equilibrium to the actions of these souls, so that they may neither exceed nor fall short of what is intended.

Maimonides

ADD TEXT



Why is ethics like medicine?

- Idea of maintaining or restoring balance: here our authors draw on the idea of a multi-part soul, and Maimonides draws an analogy between medical balance and Aristotelian virtue as a mean between extremes.
- The importance of conditioning or habituation: Maimonides uses this to explain the requirements of the Law, and also to account for the apparently excessive asceticism of some Prophets (e.g. Abraham refusing to look at his own wife's body). They sought to stay "inside the line of the law."
- Distinction between curative and preventative medicine.
- Actual connection of psychological and physical states, and the importance of individual (often inborn) tendencies and traits.

1. Eternity of the Universe, part 2



The “Andalusian Solution”

- Both Ibn Ṭufayl and Maimonides raise the eternity issue in connection with proving the existence of God.
- Both argue that we actually don't need to resolve the issue: whether we assume that the universe is eternal or not, God's existence can be proved.
- If the universe is eternal, we can use the eternity of the heavenly motion to prove the need for an immaterial mover of infinite power (i.e. God).
- If it is not eternal, then even more obviously does it require a Creator.
- This “irenic” solution is more famously found in Thomas Aquinas, who is here influenced by Maimonides.

Ibn Ṭufayl



If he supposed the origination of the universe and its coming into being, it necessarily followed that it must have been brought into being by an agent...

If we suppose the universe to be eternal, it follows that the force which moves it is neither within its body nor one external to it, but must pertain to something to which corporeal attributes may not be applied.

Uncertainty over the eternity or origination of the universe no longer troubled him, since both propositions demonstrate the existence of a non-corporeal agent.

Maimonides



Despite taking a similar approach, there are two significant differences:

He spends much more effort proving God on the assumption of eternity, probably because this is the more difficult path.

Also, he worries that if the universe is eternal, it may be nonetheless necessary. To avoid this he invokes its apparently contingent features.

As Seeskin has written, “although everything that exists serves a purpose, we have no way of determining what that purpose is other than to say that it conforms to the will and wisdom of God.”

Why such close parallels?

- Similar range of sources: Aristotle, Neoplatonic works, Galen, etc.
- Similar religious concerns, and immersion of Jewish culture in a wider Islamic context.
- Note that the direction of influence is largely one-way.
- The self-conception of philosophers and other intellectuals as an (interreligious?) elite.

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