From Protology to Eschatology

Edited by
JOSEPH VERHEYDEN,
GEERT ROSKAM,
and GERD VAN RIEL

Studien und Texte zu
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130

Mohr Siebeck

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From Protology to Eschatology

Competing Views on the Origin and the End of the Cosmos in Platonism and Christian Thought

Edited by

Joseph Verheyden, Geert Roskam, and Gerd Van Riel

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This volume is dedicated to the memory of John D. Turner (July 15, 1938 – October 26, 2019), Cotner Professor of Religious Studies and Mach University Professor of Classics and History at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where he had been teaching religious studies since 1976 after earning his MA Theol. at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond VA and his PhD in religion at Duke University (1970) and having spent some years at Claremont working on the Nag Hammadi corpus with James Robinson. With John Turner, the scholarly world loses not only a world expert on the interconnections between Gnosticism and ancient philosophy, but also a fine person who some of us have come to know on a personal basis far too late.

Joseph Verheyden
Geert Roskam
Gerd Van Riel

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Introduction

Joseph Verheyden / Geert Roskam / Gerd Van Riel

This volume contains the proceedings of an international conference held in Leuven from 7 to 9 June 2017 and organised in the framework of a research project entitled "From Chaos to Order: The Creation of the World. New Views on the Reception of Platonic Cosmogony in Later Greek Thought, Pagan and Christian." The conference was meant as a follow-up on an earlier one, also held in Leuven, 4–6 February 2015, that focused on a number of works and authors from Greek (Platonic), Jewish-Hellenistic and Christian traditions who addressed aspects of this topic. The 2015 conference was meant to further dialogue in the respective fields by taking a comparative approach and to illustrate the rich variety of opinions that were developed in the respective traditions. Special attention was given to the dominant position of Platonic cosmogony which was the central reference point in Greek philosophical tradition, but also an important factor in Jewish and Christian reflection on the biblical creation account. The proceedings of this earlier conference were published in 2017 as *Light on Creation: Ancient Commentators in Dialogue and Debate on the Origin of the World*, ed. G. Roskam and J. Verheyden (STAC, 104).

The 2017 conference marked the conclusion of the project and was meant to widen the perspective and to further contextualise the debate on the origin of the world, with special attention to how it has been linked with reflections on the end of the world, hence the title "From Protology to Eschatology."

The pagan Platonic and the Christian tradition share a number of important basic assumptions. Adherents to either of them accept there exists an ontological gap between the intelligible and the sensible, and they have developed (partly) similar ways of explaining how the intelligible order, in which all causative principles are situated, can still be linked to the material world. Moreover, the two traditions share a strong awareness that the order of the material world is not perfect. This common ontological framework conditions philosophical and theological reflections on the origin of the world (cosmology), on the status of human beings (anthropology), and on the potentials and limits of a moral life (ethics).

The 2017 conference intended to focus on the question of how, in Greek, mainly Platonic, philosophy and in Christian thought, views on the origin of the cosmos influence, and in part perhaps even determine, philosophical and theological reflection on the end or the aim towards which the cosmos is developing. The Judeo-Christian concept of a creation with temporal development and the philosophical notion of the eternity of the world evidently represent two very different views. Yet, despite these different starting points, there are also some clear traces of convergence and of influence from the latter on the former. There is a common interest in (Greek) philosophical and Christian tradition in reflecting not only on the principles that govern cosmology and on how the cosmos is reverting on its principles, but also on the answers provided in the own tradition in this regard. Plato and the Bible may be said or thought to contain the solution, but it is also felt that they need in turn to be interpreted.

Initially, the organisers had approached a number of colleagues with a sort of questionnaire on how beginning and end have been conceptualised, inviting them to reflect on what the works and authors they were asked to study tell us about such issues as whether/how the universe finally reverts upon its origin, what is the role of teleology or perfectibility, what it means that an original order is restored, both in its overall ontological structure and in the particular case of human beings, how the immortality of the soul is to be conceived in this perspective, and what are the ethical implications that have been linked to it. Many and quite variegated issues indeed, not all of which could be picked up by all speakers, but that was not the intention. The questionnaire was rather meant to help get some grip on the topic and somehow to illustrate its multiple facets. Several of the speakers told us that they had struggled with the task, in part because these are difficult questions and in part because the answers provided by the sources are all but clear. It created a fine sense of empathy amongst participants when one saw a colleague coping with a text to wring out from it some kind of answer.

After a quite severe selection nine papers were withheld for publication. For the sake of convenience they have been divided into two parts – a Christian and a non-Christian one. The editors have long pondered on whether and how to arrange the material. They finally have settled for this rather obvious and (too) simple division, all while realising that in several instances the lines are blurred; but after all, it definitely is a better option than trying to decide between philosophical and theological sources and approaches, as a fair share of "non-Christian" material and ways of reasoning or arguing shows up also in texts of Christian origin (hardly ever the other way around).

The "non-Christian" part contains four essays. *Andrea Falcon* studies the reception of Aristotle's view on the eternal character of the cosmos in the late and post-Hellenistic period. The development is gradual and diversified. If for

(some) Peripatetics the doctrine seems to have been something like a litmus test for deciding whether one was a true member of the school (so apparently Critolaus of Phaselis), the notion also received some support from outsiders. The Stoic Panaetius of Rhodes seems to have sympathised with it as a kind of alternative for the conflagration theory. Ocellus Lucanus combined it with elements of Pythagorean tradition. This is all the more remarkable if one then also takes into consideration that some within the school itself, like Xenarchus of Seleucia, favoured only a weakened version of it. It leads Falcon to the conclusion that, generally, Aristotle is gradually being "domesticated," as he calls it, and explained in such a way that his outspoken position is softened and rendered less controversial, and therefore perhaps also made less interesting. *Alain Lernould* offers a close-reading analysis of Proclus' commentary on Plato's doctrine of the creation of the human soul as developed in the *Timaeus* (41d4–42d5). Lernould focuses above all on how Proclus in his typical way of creating triads develops a theory about the creation of the soul that allows him to locate the human soul in a raster existing of the original Platonic triad of "the intermediary essence," "the intermediary self," and "the intermediary other" of which each component is itself subdivided into three "ranks," the human souls each time taking the lower, third rank, after the divine and the demonic souls. He concludes by arguing that Proclus' interpretation is inspired by the central myth of the *Phaedrus* and should be seen as one more example of the overall attempt to explain Plato's view as part of a coherent and intended system, while at the same time also going beyond the source when dealing with the generation of the human soul. *Marije Martijn* also deals with Proclus' reading of Plato, more specifically the latter's version of the so-called "Myth of Er" as found in his *Republic*, but that also shows up in other writings of Plato. The "Myth" is a notoriously strange passage addressing the question of individual eschatology or the transition to a new life upon death. The major problem with it is that it creates a tension by giving such a prominent place to Fate and cosmic order at the expense of the concept of justice linked to free will and responsibility one naturally expects to play a role in issues of coming to terms with one's life and which indeed receive quite some attention in other parts of the *Republic*. Proclus surmounts the problem by adopting a view on justice that combines and in fact creates some sort of harmony between cosmic and individual justice. Martijn's investigation of Proclus' comment leads her to single out three quite remarkable elements in the latter's analysis: his open attitude to cannibalism in times of great famine, his interest in cosmic justice, and his views on justified retribution for the individual. The last essay in this part opens up a window to the Christian side, all while staying within the orbit of Neo-Platonism. *Marc-Antoine Gavray* focuses on the controversy between Simplicius and John Philoponus on the origin of the world centring around the latter's refutation of the opinions of Aristotle and Proclus about its eternity and looking in particu-

lar to the argumentative strategies both sides are using. With regard to content, Simplicius takes issue with four elements of Philoponus' criticism, that involve either an attack on the notion of God as Creator or on a core aspect of Neo-Platonic argumentation. He reproaches him of diminishing the status of the world by making it a creature, of devaluating the status of the divine Creator as one who can only produce a perishable creation, of ignoring heaven a divine status, and of destroying or rather invalidating the principle that the inferior can only be explained from its superior. As for style, not infrequently, controversy mixes up with irony and insult, which is all the more acute if one realises how profoundly both parties, not just Simplicius, are tributary to the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition. They share several axioms and arguments, but they are using them for opposite purposes. The latter raises the question of the validity of any such argumentation, but it shows above all the limits of such philosophical debates on questions of protology and eschatology, something both participants in the discussion are not completely unaware of.

Jörg Frey opens the second part with an essay on "the logic of Johannine theology" in addressing issues of cosmology and protology. The author of a classic three-volume work on Johannine eschatology, Frey nicely shows how the latter is intrinsically interconnected with the evangelist's views on the pre-existence of Christ as presented in the opening lines of the Prologue, in particular through the soteriological task Christ is said to have come to fulfil. The doctrine of Christ's pre-existence is not only a way to express divine origin or authority, but to root human salvation, beyond the historical level, in God's eternal plan with the world and humanity. Frey continues by analysing how this take on Christ's existence affects the choice of one's reading strategy of the Gospel, briefly evoking, but then also relativising, the famous battle between Käsemann and Bultmann on whether verse 14b or 14a is the key to reading the Prologue and then also the Gospel as a whole and arguing for a reading from the perspective of Jesus' death and resurrection that forms the climax of the Gospel. He combines with it a proposal for a (hypothetical) reconstruction of John's Christology from an early (Jewish) Messianic perspective to the high Christology that characterises the Fourth Gospel. Two essays deal with Gnostic material. Picking up on his previous research on the topic *Einar Thomassen* begins his essay with presenting the way redemption is conceived of in the *Gospel of Truth* and goes on with a more general reflection on the relation between protology and eschatology as this can be found or extracted from various sources of Valentinian origin, focusing in particular on the "parallelism" there is in using these two concepts, but also on the ritual dimension that is brought out in speaking about the Saviour's redemptive task, before broadening his survey to include also sources of non-Valentinian origin. The second essay on Gnostic texts is by the regretted *John D. Turner* who studied the relation between pro-

tology and personal eschatology in the tractates *Zostrianos* and *Allogenes*, both of them, as he sees it, Platonising apocalypses of Sethian origin. Starting from the notion of realised eschatology, for which Turner finds some evidence in John's gospel, but also in Paul, he then concentrates above all on issues of ritual in Sethian tradition and on the metaphysics that guided the authors of the two treatises, in particular Plotinus' noetic triad "Being-Life-Mind" in evoking scenarios for transforming earthly into heavenly liturgy and reaching from earthly baptism to forms of mystical union or internal assimilation with the divine as culmination points of a trajectory that leads the individual to his/her final destination. The last two essays open up much broader perspectives. *Benjamin Gleede* surveys how Christian authors from the second to the fifth century have handled the question of where human beings will reside after death. Linked to it are not just issues of judgement, reward and retribution, but also the question of whether or not to use spatial categories, and which ones. It is not enough to speak of heaven and hell in this context, for such concepts are linked to specific views on cosmology. In particular, Gleede looks into counter-positions to the (almost) generally accepted views, as these can be found in the rather idiosyncratic writings of the mysterious Cosmas Indicopleustes with regard to cosmography and in Gregory of Nyssa's teaching on the resurrection of the body that makes superfluous any such discussion because the human body is completely transformed and does no longer need any form of spatiality. *George van Kooten* casts an even wider net stretching his interests from Plato to the Council of Nicaea and beyond in retracing the trajectory from Plato's views of creation as a transformation from disorder to order to the "Stoic-Pauline" notion of a creation "from God" to the concept of a creation "ex nihilo" that received some ambiguous support at the Council in the margin of the dispute with Arius. As van Kooten sees it, the second of these was a collateral victim of attacks on the first and of the outcome of the Arian dispute. This challenging thesis is developed in two steps: first, a detailed analysis of Paul's view as presented in, above all, Romans and 1 Corinthians, and carried further in the Deutero-Pauline letter to the Ephesians and the one to the Colossians; second, a critical survey of the origin and development of the rivalling view of the creation "from nothing" which was made a crucial element of his reflection on the relation between God and Christ the Son by Arius, only to meet a rather more ambivalent fate at Nicaea which firmly countered Arian Christology in asserting that the Son is created from the Father all while assuming, though not stating, that the world is created from nothing.

Two general comments by way of conclusion. First, (post-)modern readers may be puzzled (or shocked) by the apparently limitless confidence ancient philosophers and theologians display in their willingness to scrutinise issues we all know are utterly unsolvable for the human mind. There is little place for doubt,

let alone for recognising one's lack of knowledge of such borderline topics. Second, and partly as a consequence of the former, difference of opinion reigns, so it seems, and this not only between the theological and the philosophical approach or between the Christian and the non-Christian tradition, but also within the respective traditions themselves. However, it is only by juxtaposing and confronting the different insights that the peculiarities, the nuances, and maybe also some elements of agreement can be detected and perhaps reasonably validated. That was the ultimate purpose of the meeting and the editors very much hope that something of this overarching aim can be discovered in the essays included in this volume.

Eternalism in Aristotle and After

Andrea Falcon

I. Introduction

By "eternalism" I mean the doctrine that the world has always existed, and will always exist, in its present structure. In other words, according to this doctrine, the world-order (*kosmos*), as we know it, is not subject to generation or destruction but is eternal.

In this essay, I am interested in the original formulation of the doctrine by Aristotle and how it was received in the late Hellenistic and early post-Hellenistic times.[1] I will focus on the following figures: Critolaus of Phaselis, Panaetius of Rhodes, Ocellus of Lucania, and Xenarchus of Seleucia. In the case of Ocellus, we have a text, so his stance on the debate on the eternity of the world can be easily established and assessed. In the other three cases, the positions defended can be reconstructed only through the information transmitted by our ancient sources. As is often the case with Hellenistic and post-Hellenistic authors, the surviving information is not only fragmentary but also of uneven quality. Our ancient sources do not always have direct access to what was written by earlier authors but know their views or ideas only via one (or more than one) intermediate witness(es). This is certainly true for Xenarchus of Seleucia, for whom the ultimate source of information is Alexander of Aphrodisias and his lost commentary on the *De caelo*, and there is no reason to think that we are in a much better situation with respect to Critolaus of Phaselis and Panaetius of Rhodes. Still, I am persuaded that a careful study of the extant information – even when it is second- or even third-hand – is valuable because it can be used to establish that eternalism was not a homogeneous front; rather, it was a constellation of different, and often competing, positions.

[1] This essays combines, and indeed reworks, some of the findings already published in Falcon 2016a and Falcon 2017. What motivates those essays, as well as this one, is the belief that a study of the appropriation of Aristotle's views on the eternity of the world, and their adaptation to a new and different context, can serve to throw Aristotle's original formulation of his position into a sharper relief.

In this essay, I will show that different, and at times alternative, theoretical commitments may underpin the claim that the world is eternal. I will also show that none of the post-Aristotelian positions discussed in this essay really capture what is unique about the original formulation by Aristotle. I believe that establishing these results is important for at least two reasons. First, at the most general level, we learn that Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition (broadly understood so as to include positions that are inspired by Aristotle but do not belong to the Peripatetic tradition) are not one and the same thing, and that a study of the latter does not necessarily translate into a study of the former. The gap that separates Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition must not be overlooked or minimized. Quite the opposite: it must be carefully evaluated in order to assess what is specific, if not even unique, about the original position defended by Aristotle. This leads to my second reason for engaging in a close study of the early reception of Aristotle's views on the topic of the eternity of the world: we can better appreciate Aristotle's theoretical commitments by studying how they were received and selectively used in the subsequent philosophical tradition. In this sense, the study of the Aristotelian tradition can teach us something about Aristotle, although it can do so only indirectly.

II. Aristotle's Theoretical Commitments

Getting to the bottom of Aristotle's commitment to the eternity of the world is not an easy task. Aristotle argues for the eternity of motion in *Physics* 8, and for the eternity of the world in *De caelo* 1,10–12. For Aristotle, the eternity of motion entails the eternity of the world.[2] It is therefore possible, at least in principle, to derive the eternity of the world from the eternity of motion – but this is not, interestingly enough, how Aristotle proceeds in the *De caelo.* Moreover, Aristotle seems to have concerned himself with the eternity of the word also in the now lost *De philosophia.* In this section, I would like to elaborate briefly on the exegetical problems that any interpreter has to face when he or she would like to reconstruct Aristotle's position on the topic of the eternity of the world.

In *Physics* 8, Aristotle shows that the eternity of motion entails the existence of a principle that moves the first heavens by being itself outside the chain of motion – in short, he establishes the existence of a first mover that is absolutely unmoved. Establishing the existence of such a principle can be seen as the culmination of the argument offered in *Physics* 8, or as an indispensable step in the

[2] This inference cannot be generalized. It is not true, for instance, for ancient atomism. Both Leucippus and Democritus were committed to the eternity of motion, but they were not committed to the eternity of our world (*kosmos*). On the one hand, they believed that atoms always moved in a void. On the other hand, they believed that the random motion of the atom gave rise to an infinite number of worlds (*kosmoi*), all subject to generation and corruption.

course of an argument that is primarily meant to establish the existence of a single continuous (that is, uninterrupted) motion – namely, the circular motion of the heavens.[3] Either way, the doctrine of the first unmoved mover is certainly the most obvious result that one should take away from *Physics* 8.

It is, however, far from clear that this doctrine is absolutely necessary for the project attempted in *De caelo*.[4] Moreover, Aristotle's opening move in the *De caelo* is at least as controversial as his claim that there exists a first unmoved mover outside the chain of motion. He argues that the heavens are made of a special simple body different from earth, water, air, and fire, and argues that this body naturally moves in a circle (*De caelo* 1,2). He goes on to explain that, precisely because it is naturally moves in a circle, this body is not subject to generation and destruction (*De caelo* 1,3).

We may think that either one of these two commitments – the commitment to the existence of a first unmoved mover that moves the heavens by being itself outside the chain of motion, and the commitment to the existence of a special celestial simple body that naturally moves in a circle – is on its own enough to establish that the world has always existed and will always exist. If, on the one hand, Aristotle is successful in establishing the existence of a first unmoved mover that moves the heavens by being itself outside the chain of motion, why does he need to posit that they are made of a special simple body that move naturally in a circle? If, on the other hand, he is successful in establishing that the heavens are made of such a celestial simple body, why does he have to commit himself to the existence of a first unmoved mover that moves the heavens by being itself outside the chain of motion?

There is no evidence that the thesis that there exists a mover that is absolutely unmoved (defended in *Physics* 8) and the thesis that the heavens are made of a simple celestial body (defended in the *De caelo*) serve the same function, so Aristotle is not forced to choose one thesis over the other. Rather, his commitment to the eternity of the world is the result of a commitment to both theses. The outcome is an especially strong version of the eternalist position, which makes Aristotle stand out as a true anomaly in the ancient cosmological tradition.

A further complication we face in getting to the bottom of Aristotle's commitment to the eternity of the world is that Aristotle seems to have also argued for the eternity of the world in the *De philosophia*. Scholars have tried to reconstruct the contents of the *De philosophia*. Werner Jaeger has famously argued that in the *De philosophia* Aristotle defended his two most important innovations in the field of ancient physics, namely the thesis that the world is eternal,

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[3] I argued for the second reading in Falcon 2015.

[4] We find references to the doctrine of the first unmoved mover in the *De caelo*. But those references do not establish that an unmoved mover is needed for the project attempted in the *De caelo*.

and the claim that the heavens are made of a special simple body, unique to them.[5] Moreover, David Furley has suggested that the doctrine of the eternity of the world and the doctrine of the fifth substance were connected in the lost *De philosophia*, and that Aristotle might have defended the formed by using the latter.[6] Unfortunately, this suggestion cannot be substantiated. For one thing, the presence of the doctrine of the fifth substance in our work is far from a sure thing.[7] For another, we have no information about the context in which the doctrine of the eternity of the world was introduced or the strategy that was adopted to defend this doctrine. Philo of Alexandria (first century AD) is our only source of information for the arguments that Aristotle *may* have employed to defend the eternity of the world.

[Arg. 1] the world cannot be destroyed by anything outside it or by anything inside it; hence, the world is not subject to destruction (Philo, *De aeternitate mundi* 20–24 = fr. 19a Ross 1958).
[Arg. 2] Destruction entails return of parts to their natural places, but the parts of the world are already in their nature places; hence, the world is not subject to destruction (Philo, *De aeternitate mundi* 28–34 = fr. 19b Ross).
[Arg. 3] God has no motive to destroy the world, whether permanently or in order to replace it with another (sc. better) world; hence, the world is not subject to destruction (Philo, *De aeternitate mundi* 39–44 = fr. 19c Ross).[8]

We cannot be certain that these arguments go back to the *De philosophia* because there is no explicit reference to the *De philosophia* in Philo of Alexandria. In the best-case scenario, the arguments preserved by Philo go back to the lost *De philosophia* via an unknown (Peripatetic) source. Hence, they are at most *vestiges* of Aristotle's original arguments. What is clear, however, is that the arguments transmitted by Philo have very little in common with those we can read in *Physics* 8 and *De caelo* 1,10–12. As a result, we are left with three independent attempts to argue for the eternity of the world, and we are also left with the problem of how to reconcile them. More directly, any interpreter who is interested on Aristotle's original formulation of the eternalist position will have to reconcile not only what Aristotle says in *Physics* 8 with what he says *De caelo* 1,10–12, but also what Aristotle says in these two works with the surviving information about the argumentative strategy (or strategies) adopted in the lost *De philosophia*.

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[5] Jaeger ²1948: "it was this work, now lost but much read in antiquity, that contained the two philosophical views then considered most characteristic of Aristotle: the adoption of the ether as the element of the heavens, and the assertion that the cosmos is indestructible and uncreated. The doxographers commonly mention the two together as his distinctive additions to Plato's cosmology, and this is correct" (140).
[6] Furley 1989, 209–11.
[7] I refer the reader to Hahm 1982.
[8] My presentation of the three arguments is an adaptation of Sharples 2008, 61.

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