SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE AETERNITAS MUNDI
IN ARISTOTLE'S ON PHILOSOPHY

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The several fragments which, according to the majority of scholars, attest to the fact that in his On Philosophy Aristotle advocated, discussed, and attempted to prove the uncreatedness and indestructibility of the universe, are Philo of Alexandria, De Aeternitate Mundi III. 10–11; 1 ibid., V. 20–24; 2 ibid., VI. 28–VII. 34; 3 ibid., VIII. 39–43; 4 Cicero, Academica Priora (Luculus) XXXVIII. 119; 5 and Lactantius, Institutiones Divinae II. 10.24. 6 In the main we shall restrict our discussions to Philo, De Aeternitate Mundi III. 10–11, and ibid., V. 20–24, as well as to the extent to which Cicero, Academica Priora (Luculus) XXXVIII. 119, seems to confirm the report of Philo. 7

1. Frag. 17, Rose; frag. 18, Rose; frag. 18, Walzer; frag. 19, Ross; frag. 21, Untersteiner. The authenticity of the De Aeternitate Mundi, which has been questioned by some scholars, was reaffirmed by H. Leisegang 'Philons Schrift über die Ewigkeit der Welt', Philologus, vol. 92 (1937), pp. 156–176. See also A. Lesky, Geschichte der Griechischen Literatur (Bern, 1957/58), p. 729.

2. Frag. 19, Rose; frag. 19a, Walzer; frag. 19a, Ross; frag. 29, Untersteiner.

3. Frag. 20, Rose; frag. 19b, Walzer; frag. 19b, Ross; frag. 28, Untersteiner.

4. Frag. 21, Rose; frag. 19c, Walzer; frag. 19c, Ross; frag. 17, Untersteiner.

5. Frag. 18, Rose; frag. 22, Rose; frag. 20, Walzer; frag. 20, Ross; frag. 22, Untersteiner.

6. Frag. 18, Rose; frag. 22, Rose; frag. 20, Walzer; frag. 20, Ross; frag. 22, Untersteiner.

In *De Aeternitate Mundi* III. 10–11, Philo insists that ‘Aristotle was surely speaking reverently and devoutly when he insisted that the world is ungenerated and imperishable, and charged with serious ungodliness those who maintained the opposite — who were of the opinion that the great visible god, who contains in truth the sun and the moon and the remaining pantheon of planets and fixed stars, is no better than the work of man’s hands. He used to say in a spirit of mockery, so we are told, that in the past he had feared that his house be destroyed by violent winds or storms beyond the ordinary, or by time or by the lack of proper maintenance, but that now an even greater danger hung over him, coming from those who by their argument destroyed the whole world.’

In *De Aeternitate Mundi* V. 20–24, Philo suggests that ‘the arguments which prove the universe to be ungenerated and imperishable should, out of respect for the visible god, be given their proper precedence and be placed at the beginning of the discussion. To all things that admit of being destroyed there are assigned two causes of destruction, one inward and one outward. Iron, bronze and similar substances, one will find out, are being destroyed from within when rust attacks and devours them like a creeping disease, and from without when a house or a city is set afire and they catch fire from it and are destroyed by the fierce rush of the flames. And similarly, death comes to living beings from themselves when they fall sick, and from the outside when they have their throats cut or are stoned or burned to death or suffer the unclean death by hanging. If the universe, too, is destroyed, this must be either by something outside or by one of the powers within itself. Now each of these two is impossible. For there is nothing outside the universe, since all things have contributed to its completeness. For only thus will it be one, whole and ageless: one because only if something had been left out of its composition would there be another world like the present world; whole because the whole of being has been expended on it; ageless and diseaseless because bodies caught by disease and old age are destroyed by the violent assault from without of heat and cold and the other contrary forces, of which none can escape and circle around and attack the universe, since all, without exception, are entirely enclosed within it. If there is anything outside, it must be a complete void or an impassive (inactive) nature which cannot suffer or do anything. Nor again will the universe be destroyed by anything within it, firstly, because the part would then be both greater and more powerful than the whole — which is the most incredible of all things. For the universe, wielding unsurpassable power, directs all its parts and is directed by none. Secondly, because there being two causes of destruction, one within and one without, things that can suffer the one are necessarily susceptible also to the other. And the evidence? Ox and horse and man and similar animals, because they can be destroyed by iron, will also perish by disease. For it is difficult and, as a matter of fact, impossible to find anything that is fitted to be subject to the external cause of destruction and entirely insusceptible to the internal cause. This being so, it has been shown that the
world will not be destroyed by anything without, because absolutely nothing has been left outside; neither will it be destroyed by anything within, because of the preceding argument to the effect that that which is susceptible to the one cause is also susceptible to the other.8

In Academica Priora (Lucullus) XXXVIII. 119, Cicero relates that 'when your wise Stoic has said all these things [about the generation and destruction of the universe] to you syllable by syllable, Aristotle will come forth with the golden flow of his speech to say that the Stoic is talking plain nonsense. He will state that the world never came into being, because there never was a new design from which so excellent a work could have taken its beginning, and that it is so perfectly designed in every part that no force can effect such great movements and so great a change, no old age can come upon the universe by the lapse of time, so that this beautiful universe should ever fall to pieces and perish.'

Ancient doxographical tradition has it that Aristotle propagated both the uncreatedness and indestructibility of the universe.9 It will be noted that the preserved Aristotelian pragmateia strongly hint and as a matter of fact actually proceed on such an assumption but do not explicitly prove or demonstrate this doctrine. Thus, in the De Caelo, Book I, for instance, Aristotle refers to the doctrine of the uncreatedness and indestructibility of the universe without, however, substantiating this doctrine in detail.10 In De Caelo 277b27–29, he states that 'we must show not only that the heaven is one, but also that more than one heaven is impossible and, furthermore, that being exempt from corruption and generation, the heaven is eternal.' In Meteorologica 352a17ff, he avers that 'those people whose vision is restricted think that the cause of all these effects [scil., of the periodic deluges and desiccations] is a universal or general process of change.... There is some truth in this, but some falsehood too.... We must not suppose that the cause of all this is the growth of the universe. For it would be absurd to argue that the whole [universe] is in a process of general change just because some small changes of brief duration

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8. Pseudo-Ocellus Lucanus, De Universi Natura III. 1. 38–IV. 2. 44 (ed. R. Harder, Berlin, 1926, see note 7, supra), in essence sounds like an abridged and badly mutilated restatement of Philo, De Aeternitate Mundi V. 20–24. It is fairly safe to assume that Pseudo-Ocellus relies, perhaps through some intermediary sources (but certainly not through Philo), on Aristotle's On Philosophy. It will also be noted that the text of Philo, De Aeternitate Mundi V. 20–24, in all likelihood contains some specifically Philonian additions, elaborations and illustrations, such as, for instance, the enumerations of the various external causes of man's death ('when they have their throats cut or are stoned or burned to death, or suffer the unclean death by hanging'). Such detailed illustrations, which also betray Hebrew notions about violent death, most likely were not contained in the original Aristotelian text.


10. See also Aristotle, De Caelo 279b5ff.
occur..." And finally, in *Physics* 251a8ff, and *ibid.*, 251b10ff, he advocates the eternity of motion without, however, linking this perpetual motion directly to the eternity or uncreatedness and indestructibility of the universe.\(^{11}\) It will also be noted that in *De Caelo* 279b5ff, and *ibid.*, 279b17ff, Aristotle attempts to disprove Plato’s doctrine of the generation and indestructibility of the universe\(^ {12}\) by pointing out that ‘generation’ and ‘indestructibility’ are two wholly incompatible terms. This is likewise brought out by Lactantius, *Institutiones Divinae* II. 10. 24, where we are informed that ‘if the universe can perish as a whole because it perishes in parts, then it has clearly come into being. And as fragility proclaims a beginning, so it also proclaims an end. If that is true, Aristotle could not save the universe itself from having a beginning.’\(^ {13}\)

Aristotle’s failure to prove explicitly or to demonstrate in the *pragmateia* his doctrine of the uncreatedness and indestructibility of the universe has induced scholars to surmise that he had advanced and discussed this doctrine in great detail in some of his early (lost) works, namely, in his *On Philosophy* or, to be more exact, in Book III of the *On Philosophy*. Book III of the *On Philosophy*, among other issues, deals with cosmological and theological problems. As a matter of fact, in *De Caelo* 279b5ff, Aristotle insists that in order ‘to give a satisfactory verdict as to the truth [of whether the universe is ungenerated or generated, indestructible or destructible] it is necessary to be rather an arbitrator than a party to the dispute.’ This particular remark might imply that, while in the *On Philosophy* – which incidentally was a dialogue – he was still a passionate partisan in the controversy over the issue of whether the universe was created or uncreated, perishable or imperishable, in the *De Caelo* he now wishes to assume the role of a dispassionate and objective referee.\(^ {14}\) Moreover, he also seems to imply here that he is the first philosopher who had proclaimed (in the *On Philosophy*) the uncreatedness and indestructibility of the universe. Nevertheless, as we have seen, in the surviving *pragmateia* (*De Caelo, Physics, Meteorologica* or *Metaphysics*) he does not really adduce any detailed proof for, or engage in any elaborate discussion of, this radically novel thesis. This conspicuous omission leaves but one intelligent explanation: as the above mentioned fragments indicate, he must have discussed and demonstrated as well as proven this thesis in the *On Philosophy*.\(^ {15}\) Hence he apparently found it unnecessary to restate his arguments or proofs once more in the *pragmateia*.

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According to Philo, *De Aeternitate Mundi* III. 10, Aristotle, who in this seems to have the full approval of Philo, ‘charged with serious ungodliness those [who denied that the universe is ungenerated and indestructible ... and] who thought that the great visible god [scil., the visible universe] is no better than the work of man’s hands.’ Some scholars are of the opinion that Aristotle criticizes here above all Plato and his creationist theory as the latter had expounded it in the *Timaeus* 28Bff, and *ibid.*, 30A, 34B, and 37D. This opinion, however, is not altogether convincing. Admittedly, in Aristotle’s *On Philosophy* Plato comes in for some criticism because of his creationist thesis, but in the words of Philo, who seems to have had a rather thorough acquaintance with the Aristotelian *On Philosophy*, Aristotle denounces here primarily those philosophers who had advocated the destructibility or corruption of the universe rather than those who, like Plato, had insisted upon the creation of the universe. Plato, however, most certainly had insisted upon the indestructibility of the universe when he maintained that the Creator ‘sought to make the

16. See note 1, supra.

17. It should be noted, however, that in the *De Opificio Mundi* 7, Philo, in keeping with Hebrew religious tradition, stresses that one ought to be awed by the Creator of the wondrous universe and His creative activities rather than by the wondrous universe itself, that is, by His creation, as Aristotle apparently had suggested. See Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* II. 37. 95–96 (frag. 14, Rose; frag. 12, Rose; frag. 13, Walzer; frag. 18, Untersteiner); Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* IX. 26–27 (Adversus *Physicos* I. 26–27 – frag. 13, Rose; frag. 11, Rose; frag. 12b, Walzer; frag. 12b, Ross; frag. 26, Untersteiner). Obviously Philo alludes here to Aristotle’s *On Philosophy*. In this connection he also reprimands those philosophers who (like Aristotle), because they are more awed by the universe itself than by its Creator, also insist that this universe was uncreated and indestructible. Moreover, in *De Providentia* 1, Philo rejects the notion that the universe is uncreated (and indestructible). In the light of all this, some scholars have challenged the authenticity of the *De Aeternitate Mundi*. Its authenticity was re-affirmed by H. Leisegang, ‘Philons Schrift über die Ewigkeit der Welt’, *Philologus*, vol. 92 (1937), pp. 156–176.


19. In *De Natura Deorum* I. 13. 33 (frag. 21, Rose; frag. 26, Rose; frag. 26, Walzer; frag. 26, Ross; frag. 39, Untersteiner), Cicero relates that ‘in the third Book of his *On Philosophy* Aristotle causes much confusion by dissenting [on one issue] with his teacher Plato’. This dissent may consist in the fact that Aristotle advocated the uncreatedness of the universe, while Plato (in the *Timaeus*) advanced the thesis that the universe was created (and is imperishable). J. Festugière, *La Révélation d’Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. II (Paris, 1950), p. 243, note 1, on the other hand, is of the opinion that this dissent refers to the fact that Aristotle assumed the existence of a fifth element, the ether, while Plato only recognized the four traditional elements (earth, water, air and fire). In any event, it appears that Aristotle interprets Plato’s creationist theory stated in the *Timaeus* as a *creatio in tempore* (something which does not necessarily follow from the *Timaeus*) rather than a *creatio ab aeterno*. See here also A. E. Taylor, *A Commentary on Plato’s Timaeus* (Oxford, 1928), pp. 66–69; J. Festugière, *op. cit.*, supra, p. 104.

20. See also E. Berti, *op. cit.*, supra, note 7, pp. 359ff.
universe eternal. Moreover, in Aetius, Placita I. 7. 4ff, we are told, among other matters, that with Plato ‘creation’ (as it is advocated in the Timaeus) signifies ‘imposition of order upon disorder,’ that is, the ‘imposition of form upon matter,’ rather than, as Aristotle would have it in De Caelo 280b1–20, the ‘coming into being’ of something which ‘formerly was not’. Hence, the rather sarcastic statement of Aristotle, viz., that because of the destructibility of the universe ‘now an even greater danger hung over him,’ cannot possibly apply to Plato. This being so, one may surmise that the charge of ‘grave ungodliness’ or ‘blasphemy’ is directed not so much against Plato - although Aristotle is also in partial disagreement with Plato and with some of his

21. Plato, Timaeus 37D. See also ibid., 38B ff; 31A ff. In Philebus 28DE, Plato insists that ‘mind is the king of heaven’. Then he asks the question, ‘whether all this which they call the universe is left to the guidance of unreason and chance or on the contrary . . . is ordered and governed by a marvellous intelligence and wisdom. Wide apart are these two assertions . . . for what you are just now saying [to wit, the first assertion, namely, that the universe is left to the guidance of unreason and chance] appears to me to be blasphemy. But the other assertion, viz., that mind orders all things – is worthy of the universe, and of the sun, and of the moon, and of the stars, and of the whole sphere of the heavens. And never shall I say or think otherwise’. See also Plato, Laws 907E ff.

22. Philo, De Aeternitate Mundi III. 11.

23. Some scholars are of the opinion that Plato’s account of the creation of the universe as it is advanced in the Timaeus has only a ‘symbolic meaning’ or perhaps is nothing more than a ‘didactic fiction’. See, for instance, E. Bignone, op. cit., supra, note 7, vol. II, p. 404, and ibid., p. 411; E. Berti, loc. cit., supra, note 20. See also the remarks of Aetius, Placita, cited in the text, supra. In any event, the charge of ‘grave ungodliness’ or ‘blasphemy’, it will be noted, could not very well be made against Plato. In De Caelo 279b12–280a10, Aristotle refutes those (Xenocrates and some other members of the Early Academy, see Simplicius, Comment in Arist. De Caelo, CIAG, vol. VII, ed. J. L. Heiberg, Berlin, 1894, p. 303, lines 33ff.) ‘who [like Plato] hold that the universe, though indestructible, was yet generated, and who attempt to support their argument by a parallel which is, however, illusory. They maintain that in their assertions about the generation of the universe they are actually doing what geometers do when they construct their figures, not implying, however, that the universe really has a beginning. They do so solely for didactic reasons which might facilitate our understanding by exhibiting the object, like the figure, as in course of formation. The two cases, as we have said, are not parallel, however. For, in the construction of the geometric figure, when the various steps are completed, the required figure forthwith results. But in these other demonstrations what results is not that which was actually required. Indeed, it cannot possibly be so, for antecedent and consequent, as assumed, are in contradiction. The ordered, it is said (by Plato in the Timaeus), arose out of the unordered – and the same thing cannot be at one and the same time ordered and unordered. There must be a process as well as a lapse of time separating the two states. In the geometric figure, on the other hand, there is no separation in time. It is clear, then, that the universe cannot be at once eternal or indestructible and generated’.

24. This would also to some extent vitiate Jaeger’s view that in the On Philosophy Aristotle breaks radically with Plato’s fundamental philosophic position. See note 18, supra.
teachings – but rather against the Atomists. In the light of Plato's *Timaeus* and *Laws*, to mention only two Platonic dialogues, it would be utterly nonsensical to charge Plato with 'grave ungodliness'.

The accounts contained in Philo, *De Aeternitate Mundi* V. 20–24, *ibid.*, VI. 28 – VII. 34, and *ibid.*, VIII. 39–43, it may be contended, make it appear that, broadly speaking, in the *On Philosophy* Aristotle demonstrated his rejection of the destructibility of the universe by applying the following syllogism: (1) all destruction is due to some definite factors, causes or conditions; (2) as regards the universe no such factors, causes or conditions can possibly exist; (3) consequently, the universe is indestructible. Elaborating the statement that all destruction is due to some factors, causes or conditions, Philo (Aristotle) points out that such factors, causes or conditions could be either some other ('outside' or 'inside') forces, causes or factors, or God. Now, according to Aristotle, there exist no such 'outside forces,' that is, forces outside the universe. In any event, even if there existed such 'outside forces,' Aristotle insists, they would have to be weaker than the universe and, hence, would be incapable of influencing it. And what is incapable of being destroyed by some 'outside forces,' is also incapable of being destroyed by some 'inside forces.' God, on the other hand, being the originator of the cosmic order, cannot possibly be the cause of disorder (and destruction). For, according to Philo, *De Aeternitate Mundi* VIII. 39ff, 'what befits God is to turn disorder into order rather than order into disorder,' and 'to give shape to the shapeless.' In brief, since God cannot possibly be the 'principle of unreason and chance,' it would be contrary to the nature of God to destroy the universe.

The report contained in Philo, *De Aeternitate Mundi* V. 20–24, especially

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25. It will also be noted that the other Aristotelian arguments preserved by Philo (see notes 2–4 supra) in fact seem to stress the indestructibility rather than the uncreatedness of the universe. See, for instance, E. Bignone, *op. cit.*, supra, note, 7, vol. II, p. 487. It should further be observed that as a Jew Philo could not possibly accept Aristotle's doctrine of the uncreatedness of the universe. See Philo, *De Opificio Mundi* II. 7. If in the *De Aeternitate Mundi* III. 10, he praises Aristotle for his 'devotedness and piety', he does so because he has in mind here primarily Aristotle's insistence upon the indestructibility of the universe (which, in the opinion of Philo, is one of Aristotle's truly significant contributions to philosophy), rather than Aristotle's doctrine of the uncreatedness of the universe. See also H. A. Wolfson, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Cambridge, Mass., 1948), vol. I, p. 295.


27. For additional detail, see Philo, *De Aeternitate Mundi* V. 20–24, and *ibid.*, VIII. 39–43. Aetius, *Placita (Doxographi Graeci*, ed. H. Diels, Berlin, 1879) 297ff; Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* V. 156ff; and the Epicurean Velleius (in Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* I. 9. 21ff), deal with the problem of why God (or the gods) could not have created the universe in tempore. In their arguments, though for vastly different reasons or purposes, Aetius, Lucretius and Velleius probably rely on some of the statements which Aristotle made in his *On Philosophy* in order to demonstrate that the universe was uncreated. As a matter of fact, Cicero's assertion in *Acad. Prior*. XXXVIII. 119] that 'there was never a new design' (or 'a new divine resolve') which might have brought about the sudden creation of the universe, seems to echo one of the Epicurean arguments against any creationist theory.
the assertion that 'to all things which admit of being destroyed there are assigned two causes of destruction, one inward and one outward,' finds confirmation in Cicero, *Academica Priora* *(Lucullus)* XXXVIII. 119.\(^8\) Here we are informed that 'the universe is so perfectly designed ... that no [outward] force can effect ... so great a change ... nor can old age [that is, an inward cause] come upon the universe ... .' This statement, which definitely alludes to the 'two causes of destruction, one outward and one inward,' mentioned by Philo, is explicitly credited to Aristotle (and to 'the golden flow of his speech') by Cicero.\(^9\) In other words, Cicero not only confirms the Philonian thesis of the two causes that might destroy the universe, but he definitely identifies the ultimate source of this thesis: Aristotle. Moreover, Cicero’s reference to the ‘golden flow’ of Aristotle’s speech seems to indicate that he has in mind here one of Aristotle’s early dialogues, that is, the *On Philosophy* which, like some of the other early Aristotelian dialogues, had gained much fame and much praise in antiquity for its stylistic beauty.

Cicero also relates\(^8\) that, according to Aristotle, 'the universe never came into being, because there never was a new design from which so excellent a work could have taken its beginning.' Broadly speaking, this Ciceronian assertion reiterates (and compresses) some of the statements which, according to Philo, *De Aeternitate Mundi* VIII. 39–43, Aristotle had made in the *On Philosophy*. It is also quite possible that this particular remark of Aristotle was directed against Plato’s creationist theory. One may ask here why Aristotle rejected the possibility of a ‘new design’ (which also seems to underlie Plato’s creationist thesis) or the likelihood of a ‘new divine resolve.’ The only plausible answer seems to be, as may be gathered from Philo, *De Aeternitate Mundi* VIII. 39–43, Aristotle’s insistence that the absolute perfection characteristic of God or of the Creator does not admit of any ‘change’ or, perhaps, of any ‘innovation’ in the Divine Mind. From all this it seems to follow that both Cicero and Philo refer here to one and the same Aristotelian source – the *On Philosophy*.\(^3\)

\(^{28}\) See note 5, *supra*.


\(^{30}\) Cicero, *loc. cit., supra*.

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