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AL-ŠAHRASŤĀNĪ ON PROCLUS

MICHAEL CHASE

The *Book of Religions and Sects* (*Kitāb al-milal wa l-niḥal*)¹ by the medieval Persian historian Abū l-Fatḥ Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Karīm b. Aḥmad Al-Šahrastānī² (1086/7-1153) is a precious source of information, not only on the history of Islamic religions, but also on the way Greek philosophy was handed down to and preserved by Islam.

Chapter six of Book Two of Šahrastānī's *magnum opus* is dedicated to “The sophisms (or doubts) of Proclus on the eternity of the world”. It consists mainly in an abbreviated paraphrase of Proclus' treatise entitled “Eighteen Arguments Against the Eternity of the World”, which is lost in its original Greek, but can be reconstructed from the fragments preserved in the refutation by the sixth-century Christian Neoplatonist John Philoponus, entitled “Against Proclus on the Eternity of the World”³. Proclus' treatise was known in Arabic, in at least two versions. The great translator Isḥāq ibn Ḥunain (ob. 910) had made an Arabic version of nine of Proclus' eighteen arguments against the world's generation within time, while an older, perhaps complete translation, designated in Isḥāq's manuscript as “poor in quality”, has only recently been edited by Elivra Waklenig⁴. This seems to be the version that Šahrastānī used. It's not certain, however, whether the Arabic translators had direct access to Proclus' text, or whether they knew it only through Philoponus' *Against Proclus*, which

¹ For the text, see the eds. by W. Cureton, 2 vols., London 1842-6, and by Muḥammad Fatḥ Allāh Badrān, 2 vols., Cairo 1370-5/1951-5; for a translation, see *Shahrastani, Livre des Religions et des Sectes*, I, Traduction avec introduction et notes par Daniel Gimaret et Guy Monnot, 1986; II, Traduction avec introduction et notes par Jean Jolivet et Guy Monnot (Paris: Peeters/Unesco), 1993.

² Born in Khorasan, now in north-eastern Iran, the young Muḥammad studied at Nīšāpūr, then taught briefly at the Nizāmiyya at Baghdad (c. 1117-1120), before joining the court of the Seljuk Sultan Sanjar at Marv in what is now Turkmenistan. Late in life, he seems to have returned to his native village of Šahrastān, where he died at age 66, during the destruction of Sanjar's realm by the Oghuz Turks.

³ Cf. Chase, M., ‘Philoponus' cosmology in the Arabic tradition’, *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévales*, 79.2 (2012): 271-306.

⁴ Cf. Waklenig, E., ‘The other Arabic version of Proclus' *De aeternitate mundi*. The surviving first eight arguments’, *Oriens* 40 (2012), 51-95, who edits the text from mss. Petrev Pasha 617 and Üniuersite Kütüphanesi 1458. I thank Dr. R. Hansberger for calling this work to my attention.

seems to have been translated in its entirety⁵. Indeed, Proclus' first argument, missing from the Greek *unicum* Marcianus Graecus 236 (9th-10th cent.), has been preserved only in the Arabic⁶.

Šahrastānī provides a paraphrase of eight of Proclus' eighteen arguments, viz. nos. 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, and 13⁷. At the end of his presentation, however, Šahrastānī appends a final section that appears to derive from a different source. It reads as follows⁸:

T1 Al-Šahrastānī, *Kitāb al-milal wa-l-niḥal*, p. 340, 15ff. Cureton = p. 1031-1032

Badran:

Wa-mimmā yunqalu ‘anhu fī qidam al-‘ālam qawlihi lan yatawahhimu ḥudūt al-‘ālam illā ba‘da an lam yakun fa-abda‘ahu al-bārī‘ wa-fī al-ḥāla allatī lam yakun lam yaḥlū min ḥālāt talāt, immā an al-bārī‘ lam yakun qādirān fa-šāra qādirān, wa-dālika muḥāl, li-annahu qādirun lam yazal, wa-immā /p. 341/ annahu la yurīdu fa-arāda, wa-dālika muḥāl aydān li-annahu murīd lam yazal wa-immā annahu lam yufīda al-ḥikma wa-dālika muḥāl aydān li-anna al-wujūd ašrafa min al-‘adam ‘alā-l-iṭlāq fa-idā batalat ḥādihi al-jihāt al-talāta tašābuhā fī al-šifa al-ḥāša wa-hiya al-qidam ‘alā aṣl al-mutakallim aw kāna al-qidam bi-l-dāti lahu dūna ġairihi wa-in kānā ma‘ān fī al-wujūd wa-allah al-mūfiq.

Of what has been handed down from him [sc. Proclus] about the world's eternity, he said that the coming-into-being of the world cannot be imagined unless it <exists> after not having existed, and the Creator originated it. In the case of its non-existence, one of three states of affairs must hold true: either the Creator was not powerful but became powerful - but this is absurd, for he is unfailingly

⁵ Cf. Scholten, C., *Johannes Philoponos. De aeternitate mundi /Über die Ewigkeit der Welt*, 5 vols., Turnhout: Brepols 2009-2011, vol. 1, p. 38-39; Gannagé, E., ‘Philopon (Jean-). Tradition arabe,’ in R. Goulet, ed., *Dictionnaire des Philosophes Antiques*, t. V, *De Paccius à Rutilius Rufus*. VA, *De Paccius à Plotin*, Paris 2011, p. 503-563, at p. 536. Contra: Wakelnig, *Arabic version*; Endress, G., *PROCLUS ARABUS. Zwanzig Abschnitte aus der Institutio Theologica in arabischer Übersetzung*, Beirut: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1973, p. 17.

⁶ Hence the collaboration of Arabic scholars, who have translated Proclus' first argument in the two recent English translations of Philoponus's *Against Proclus*: J. McGinnis in *Proclus, On the eternity of the world*, translated with a commentary by H. S. Lang and A. D. Macro, Berkeley 2001; P. Adamson in Share, M., *Philoponus against Proclus's "On the eternity of the world 1-5"*, Ithaca 2005. Iṣḥāq's translation is as old a witness to Proclus's text as the codex which served as the basis of Rabe's edition of Philoponus' *De aeternitate mundi*.

⁷ For a list of these arguments and the corresponding passages of Philoponus, *De aet. mundi*, cf. Segonds, A.-Ph.-Luna, C., ‘Proclus de Lycie’, in Goulet, ed., *Dictionnaire*, p. 1658.

⁸ My translation from the Arabic, which I have compared against the versions of Jolivet/Rashed and of Haarbrucker.

powerful⁹ - or /p. 341/ he did not will <to create>, and then so willed¹⁰ - but this is again absurd, for he is unfailingly willing, or his wisdom could not decide - and this is again absurd, for existence is absolutely nobler than non-existence¹¹. But if these three cases are null and void, he is equal in his characteristic property according to the Mutakallimūn, for eternity is his essential property *per se*, and they are simultaneous in being. But God is sufficient.

According to this extract, “Proclus”, who presumably wants to refute the possibility that God created the world in time, begins by defining the generation of the world as existing after not having existed (*ḥudūṭ al-‘ālam ... ba‘da an lam yakun*). In late Neoplatonic thought, this was considered the Aristotelian interpretation of the Greek term *genētos* (“generated”), whereas when Plato in the *Timaeus* spoke of the world as being *genētos*, he was interpreted as meaning that the world derives its being from elsewhere and has its being in constant becoming¹². Later Greek commentators on the *Timaeus* distinguished seven meanings of this term¹³, with Proclus coming down in favor of meanings three and four: the world is *genētos* in

⁹ Cf. Proclus' fourth argument, with Philoponus' counter-arguments at *aet. mundi* 4, 11, p. 82, 1-84, 28 Rabe.

¹⁰ Cf. Proclus' sixteenth argument, and in general Sorabji, R., *Time, Creation and the Continuum. Theories in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, London: Duckworth/Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983, pp. 240ff.

¹¹ Cf. Proclus' seventeenth argument, with Philoponus' retort at *aet. mundi* 6, 4, pp. 128, 1-131, 25; 17.6, pp. 601, 21-604, 11 Rabe.

¹² Cf. Simplicius, *In Phys.*, p. 1154, 6-7 Diels: *kai gar genēton legetai to proteron men mê on, husteron de on*. Cf. Aristotle, *De Caelo*, 280b15.

¹³ The Middle Platonist commentator Calvisius Taurus seems to have been the first to enumerate the various meanings of the Greek term *genēton*. He distinguished four of them: (1) what is not generated but has the same genus as generated things; such things are generable in the sense that an object hidden in the center of the earth can still be said to be visible (Greek *horaton*), even if it will never actually be seen. The second meaning (2) covers what is notionally but not actually composite: things, that is, that can be analysed in thought into their component parts, as the middle note of the musical scale is composed of the lowest and the highest. The third meaning (3) of *genētos* concerns what's always in the process of becoming; that is, according to Platonic philosophy, the whole of the sublunar world, which, like the mythical Proteus, is subject to constant change. Finally (4), *genētos* can mean what derives its being from elsewhere; that is, from God: similarly, the moon's light can be said to be generated by the sun, although there has never been a time when this was not the case. Slightly more than a century later, Porphyry added additional meanings of *genētos*: these include (5): what has the *logos* of generation, i.e. what can be analysed in thought. Meaning no. (6) covers sensible objects like houses, ships, plants and animals, which obtain their being through a process of generation. Finally, the seventh and last meaning (7) of *genētos* is what begins to exist in time after not having existed. It's this last meaning of ‘generated’ that Porphyry denies is applicable to Plato's creation story in the *Timaeus*. Cf. Chase, M.,

the sense that it's always in the process of becoming, and in that it derives its being from elsewhere¹⁴.

But if the world came into being after a period of time in which it did not exist, how are we to explain this previous period of non-existence? Šahrastānī goes on to envisage three possible explanations:

1. God was not sufficiently powerful to create at one time, and then became powerful. This eventuality is considered absurd, since God is always powerful (*li-annahu qādir^{um} lam yazal*)¹⁵.

2. God did not wish to create at one time, then did wish to create. This is absurd, because God is always willing (*li-annahu murīd^{um} lam yazal*).

3. God's wisdom could not decide whether it was better to create or not to create. But this is absurd, for existence is unconditionally better than non-existence¹⁶.

Šahrastānī concludes his report with what is probably his own personal observation: if none of these three possibilities is valid – that is, if the world was not created in time – then God and the world will be equally eternal; yet eternity is an attribute that is to be reserved for God alone¹⁷.

I know of no Greek text in which these three objections, based on God's power, will, and knowledge respectively, are stated together in precisely the same form, although there is one from Proclus that comes quite close, as we shall see in a moment. Scholars have

‘Discussions on the Eternity of the world in Late Antiquity’, *ΣΧΟΛΗ, A Journal of the Centre for Ancient Philosophy and the Classical Tradition*, 5. 2:111-173, at p. 114-115.

¹⁴ Cf. Proclus, *In Tim.*, I, 290, 17ff.; Proclus apud Philoponus, *aet. mundi* p. 148, 1f. Rabe. Already in Porphyry's *Sentence* 14 (p. 6, 11-13 Lamberz), bodies are said to be generated (*genēta*) in two senses: as being dependent on a productive cause (\cong meaning 4 above), and as composite \cong meanings 2; 5).

¹⁵ On the meaning of *lam yazal*, “without ceasing”, see Frank, R., “‘Lam yazal’ as a formal term in Muslim theological discourse”, reprinted in his *Philosophy, Theology, and Mysticism in Medieval Islam. Texts and Studies on the development and history of Kalam*, vol. I, Aldershot 2005, Study XIII.

¹⁶ The symmetry of the argument would have been preferable if Šahrastānī had added “and God is always knowing”. *Qādir* and *murīd* are, of course, two of the 99 divine names of God in Islamic theology, but so is ‘*alīm*’ (*‘ālim*, ‘*allām*’), “wise, knowing, knowledgeable”. On these questions see Gimaret, D., *Les noms divins en Islam*, Paris 1988.

¹⁷ On the notion that eternity is not suitable for the world, cf. Bianchi, L., *L'errore di Aristotele. La polemica contro l'eternità del mondo nel XIII secolo*, Firenze 1984, 108ff., citing William of Balione, Bonaventure, John Pecham, William of Falegar, Raymund Llull.

explained Šahrastānī's last paragraph in a variety of ways: some have claimed, erroneously, that it is a quote from Proclus; others, closer to the mark, that it has been cobbled together from elements of Proclus' twelfth and sixteenth arguments against the world's eternity¹⁸. It is true that there are some parallels to the arguments Šahrastānī attributes to Proclus elsewhere in Philoponus' *De aeternitate mundi*, and they have duly been pointed out in the excellent recent edition of this work by Clemens Scholten. My own impression is that these alleged parallels are not all that striking. What does strike me, however, is the parallel between the arguments Šahrastānī attributes to Proclus (412-485) and some of the anti-creationist arguments mentioned by Augustine (354-430), who wrote half a century earlier that the Lycian Diadoch. This fact, if it is one, would in turn call for a historical explanation, which I will propose a bit later.

That God is all-powerful is, of course, axiomatic in Greek, Christian, and Islamic thought¹⁹. But can God have lacked the power necessary to create the world at one point in time, only to obtain that power subsequently?

Phrased in these terms, the entire Greek Neoplatonic tradition would have answered with a resounding No!

In the fourth argument of his *On the eternity of the world*, as reproduced by Philoponus, Proclus provides strong arguments against this hypothesis. His main objection is that God, as an immobile cause, cannot change: if He did, since all change is motion, and motion is an incomplete actuality, then God would undergo a transition from an imperfect to a

¹⁸ These two arguments were among those omitted from the Arabic translation of Proclus' treatise, perhaps because they contained doctrines (existence of an eternal model of the world and of a world soul, eternity of matter) that might have been offensive to an Islamic reading public. Cf. Jolivet-Monnot, *Shahrastani*, p 347 n. 33.

¹⁹ In this context, one may recall Gilson's comments when, in *La Philosophie au Moyen Âge*, Paris 1986, he claims (p. 459), in the context of a defense of the condemnations of Arabic Aristotelianism in 1277, that "Comprise comme une protestation contre le nécessitarisme grec, cette condamnation conduira nombre de théologiens à affirmer comme possibles, en vertu de la toute-puissance du Dieu chrétien, des positions scientifiques ou philosophiques traditionnellement jugées impossibles en vertu de l'essence des choses. En permettant des expériences mentales nouvelles, la notion théologique d'un Dieu infiniment puissant a libéré les esprits du cadre fini où la pensée grecque avait enclos l'univers". These affirmations seem highly debatable, but this is not the place to enter into the debate.

perfect state, and this, for Proclus, would be an impious suggestion²⁰. In addition, since all change takes place in time, such a change would imply that God has need of time. But in fact it is God who creates time, so it is absurd to suppose he needs time in order to act. Philoponus responds that creation is a substantial characteristic of God, but a substantial characteristic is independent of any relation to something else. If heating is the substantial characteristic of fire, then fire possesses this characteristic independently of whether or not there are any nearby objects susceptible of being heated. Thus, God's nature as creator does not depend upon the actual exercise of his creative capacity²¹. Here, however, we are more concerned with the objections to creation within time than with their possible resolutions.

The anti-creationist objections concerning God's power, will and knowledge are in turn linked to another venerable question: Why didn't God create sooner? It goes back at least as far as Cicero, and probably to Aristotle's lost dialogue *De Philosophia*²², and was subsequently recycled by Epicureans, Gnostics²³ and Manichaeans. Some of the most famous and influential occurrences of the argument, however, occur in Augustine. In Book XI, 10, 12 of his *Confessions*, just before embarking upon his famous analysis of time, Augustine faces up to the objections raised by some anonymous interlocutors:

T2 Augustine, *Confessions*, XI 10:

Nonne ecce pleni sunt vetustatis suae qui nobis dicunt, 'quid faciebat deus antequam faceret caelum et terram? sin enim vacabat,' inquit, 'et non operabatur aliquid, cur non sic semper et deinceps, quemadmodum retro semper cessavit ab opere?'

Behold, are they not full of their own venerability, those who say to us: "what was God doing before He made heaven and earth? For if he were idle," they say, "and did not perform any action,

²⁰ On this, see Chase, M., "Discussions on the eternity of the world in Antiquity and contemporary cosmology, I-II", *ΣΧΟΛΗ, Ancient Philosophy and the Classical Tradition*, 7.1 (2013) 19-68, at pp. 48ff.

²¹ Similarly, Abū Ḥāmid al-Isfizārī (10th cent.), refuting Proclus, writes that God can be generous (*jawād*) even if nothing else exists apart from Him; cf. Wakelnig, 'Arabic version', p. 55f.

²² Aristotle, *De Philosophia*, fr. 20 Ross (1955) = Cicero, *Lucullus* 38.119: neque enim ortum esse unquam mundum, quod nulla fuerit novo consilio initio ... Cf. Effe, B., *Studien zur Kosmologie und Theologie der Aristotelischen Schrift "Über die Philosophie"*, München: C.H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1970, p. 23ff.

²³ Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 2, 28, 3; Origen, *De Princip.* 3, 5, 3.

why was he not in this state always and henceforth, as he had always refrained from his work in the past?"

Any new will or motion in God, the objectors went on to argue, would eliminate God's eternity, given that his will is equivalent to his substance, and a change in a thing's substance means it cannot be eternal²⁴.

Like Aristotle in the *De Philosophia*, Augustine himself is anxious to avoid the consequence that God might change his mind. A little farther on in the *Confessions*, he returns to the point that God's substance never varies though time. God does not want one thing now, another thing later: instead, He always and eternally wills the same thing:

T3 Augustine, *Confessions* 2, 15, 18

unde non eum modo velle hoc modo velle illud, sed semel et semper velle omnia quae vult non iterum et iterum neque nunc ista nunc illa nec velle postea quod nolebat aut nolle quod volebat prius, quia talis voluntas mutabilis est et omne mutabile aeternum non est, deus autem noster aeternus est.

...hence, it is not the case that He wills this or that, but He wills all at once and always all that He wills, not again and again, nor now these things, now those, nor does he later will after not having willed, or fail to will what he willed previously, for such a will would be changeable, and everything changeable is not eternal, but our God is eternal²⁵.

For Augustine, God's will cannot change, on pain of forfeiting his eternal nature. Instead, as Gregory of Nyssa and Boethius pointed out, God's eternal will that a change should occur does not entail a changing will on His part²⁶.

There has been considerable debate about the identity of the adversaries who raised the objections recorded by Augustine. The Manichaeans used similar arguments: already in his *On Genesis against the Manicheans*, written in 388-389, Augustine cites his opponents as

²⁴ Like Plotinus, Augustine would agree that God's will is identical with his essence: with *Confessions* 12, 15, 18; 12, 28, 38 cf. Plotinus, *Enneads* VI 8, 13, 8; 52f.

²⁵ Cf. Augustine *De Gen. c. M.* 1, 2, 3-4; *De div. quaest. LXXXIII*, 28 and already Seneca, *De benef.*, 6.23.1: nec umquam primi consilii deos paentitet.

²⁶ Cf. Sorabji, *Time*, p. 240ff.

asking why it suddenly occurred to God to create, after not having done so for eternity²⁷. By the time he comes to write the *City of God* in 417, however, it is clearly the Platonists who raise the uncomfortable question of why it pleased God to create heaven and earth when he did, after failing to do so previously²⁸. These Platonists were motivated, Augustine informs us, by their desire to avoid the unpalatable consequence that God suddenly got the idea of creating. Indeed, for Augustine, the entire Neoplatonic doctrine of continuous or eternal creation is, he tells us, an attempt to avoid the conclusion that God suddenly came up with a new idea:

T4 Augustine, *Civ. dei* XI, 4, 2

Qui autem a Deo quidem factum fatentur, non tamen eum temporis volunt habere, sed suae creationis initium, ut modo quodam vix intellegibili semper sit factus, dicunt quidem aliquid, unde sibi Deum videntur velut a fortuita temeritate defendere, ne subito illi venisse credatur in mentem, quod nunquam ante venisset, facere mundum.

Those, however, who admit the world was created by God, but say that it had no beginning to its time, but rather to its creation, so that in some scarcely comprehensible way it is always being created, say something whereby they think to defend God as if from a fortuitous temerity, lest it be thought that there suddenly came to his mind that which had never come before: that is, to create the world.

It is above all in the *City of God* X, 31 that Augustine reveals the identity of these Platonists who, to avoid the absurdities entailed by a change in the divine will, have come up with the notion of continuous creation: it was Porphyry, probably in his lost work entitled *De regressu animae*:

T5 Augustine, *Civ. dei*, X, 31

Cur ergo non potius diuinitati credimus de his rebus, quas humano ingenio peruestigare non possumus, quae animam quoque ipsam non Deo coaeternam, sed creatam dicit esse, quae non erat? Vt enim hoc Platonici nollent credere, hanc utique causam idoneam sibi uidebantur adferre, quia, nisi quod semper ante fuisset, sempiternum deinceps esse non posset; quamquam et de mundo et de his,

²⁷ *De Gen. c. M.* I, 2, 3: et quid ei subito facere placuit, quod numquam ante faceret per tempora aeterna?

²⁸ *Civ. dei* XI, 4, 2: Sed quid placuit aeterno Deo tunc facere caelum et terram, quae antea non fecisset?

quos in mundo deos a Deo factos scribit Plato, apertissime dicat eos esse coepisse et habere initium, finem tamen non habituros, sed per conditoris potentissimam uoluntatem in aeternum mansuros esse perhibeat. Verum id quo modo intellegant inuenerunt, non esse hoc uidelicet temporis, sed substitutionis initium. "Sicut enim, inquit, si pes ex aeternitate semper fuisset in puluere, semper ei subesset uestigium, quod tamen uestigium a calcante factum nemo dubitaret, nec alterum altero prius esset, quamuis alterum ab altero factum esset: sic, inquit, et mundus atque in illo dii creati et semper fuerunt semper existente qui fecit, et tamen facti sunt."

Why, then, should we not rather believe the divinity about these things which we cannot investigate with human ingenuity, that divinity which tells us the soul itself is not co-eternal with God, but that it was created after having not existed? In order for the Platonists to refuse to believe this, they thought they adduced this adequate cause: unless something has always existed previously, it cannot be perpetual subsequently. However, Plato openly says both of the world and of what he writes as the gods in the world made by God, that they began to exist and have a beginning, but by the most powerful will of the creator he testifies they will remain for eternity. Yet they found a way to understand this, i.e. that this is not a beginning of time, but of subsistence. "Just as, they say, if a foot was in dust from eternity, a footprint would always be under it²⁹, yet no one would doubt that the footprint was made by someone treading, so, they say, both the world and the gods created within it always existed, since He who made them always exists, and yet they were made"³⁰.

These texts from Augustine, or rather the doctrines he attributes in them to his (probably Neoplatonic) adversaries, provide some elements that exhibit parallels to the arguments Šahrastānī attributes to Proclus. But it must be admitted that the closest parallel comes from Proclus himself, in a reference already pointed out by Jolivet and Monnot in their superb translation of the *Book of Religions and sects*:

²⁹ Bonaventure (*Commentary on the Sentences*, II, d. 1, p. 1, a. 1, q. 2, vol. II, p. 19ff. Quaracchi) cites this example with approval, taking it to be a good illustration of the eternal existence of matter.

³⁰ In his collection of Porphyry's fragments, Andrew Smith includes only the two lines p. 454, 12-13 as fr. 298 a of Porphyry's *De regressu*, while his fragment 298 runs from p. 452, 2-453, 3. Yet there can be very little doubt that the anonymous quote introduced by *inquiunt* at p. ch. 31, p. 545, 1-7 is also taken from the same work of Porphyry. Cf. Courcelle, P., *Les Lettres grecques en Occident, de Macrobe à Cassiodore*, Paris 1948² p. 174 n. 3. Porphyry's "corrections" to the doctrines of Plato were the subject of the entire previous section of the *civ. Dei* (X.30); Porphyry is alluded to immediately after the passage below (*iste*, p. 454, 13 D.-K.), and his views will continue to be discussed in X.32 ("On the universal path for the salvation of the soul, which Porphyry failed to find because he sought it poorly etc.").

T6 Proclus, *In Tim.*, I, p. 288, 13ff. Diehl

ἔτι τοίνυν εἰ ὁ δημιουργὸς τῶν αἰεὶ ὄντων ἐστίν, οὐχὶ ποτὲ μὲν δημιουργεῖ, ποτὲ δὲ ἀφίησι τοὺς οἴακας· οὐ γὰρ ἂν ἔχοι τὸ ὡσαύτως οὐδὲ τὸ ἀμετάβλητον· εἰ δὲ αἰεὶ δημιουργεῖ, καὶ τὸ δημιουργούμενον αἰεὶ ἐστί. τί γὰρ καὶ βουλόμενος τὸν ἄπειρον χρόνον ἀργῶν ἐπὶ τὴν δημιουργίαν τραπήσεται; πότερον ἄμεινον τοῦτο ὑπολαβῶν; ἀλλ' αὐτὸ τοῦτο τὸ ἄμεινον ἠγνόει πρότερον, ἢ οὐ; εἰ μὲν γὰρ ἠγνόει νοῦς ὢν, ἄτοπον· ἔσται γὰρ περὶ αὐτὸν ἄγνοια καὶ γνώσις· εἰ δὲ ἐγίνωσκε, διὰ τί μὴ πρότερον ἤρχετο γεννᾶν καὶ κοσμοποιεῖν; ἀλλ' οὐχὶ τοῦτο ἄμεινον. τί οὖν οὐκ ἔμενεν ἐπὶ τῆς ἀργίας, εἰ θέμις εἰπεῖν; νοῦν γὰρ ὄντα καὶ θεὸν τὸ ἦττον κάλλιον ἀντὶ τοῦ μάλλον διώκειν οὐδὲ ὄσιον ἐννοεῖν. ἀλλὰ μὴν ἀναγκαῖον ταῦτα συγχωρεῖν, εἰ γενητὸς κατὰ χρόνον ὁ κόσμος, ἀλλὰ μὴ τῇ ἀπειρίᾳ τοῦ χρόνου συνυφεστώς.

In addition, if the Demiurge belongs among beings that always exist, he does not create at one point in time and release the rudder at another, for then he would not remain in the same state or be unchangeable. But if he always creates, then the created product also exists always. Why would he decide after spending an infinite time in idleness that he should turn to creative activity? Did he think it was better? But was he previously unaware of this better [outcome], or not? If as Intellect he was ignorant, that is absurd, for there would be both ignorance and knowledge in him. But if he did know it, why did he not begin to generate and create the cosmos earlier?³¹ But this [activity] is not better, [someone might say]. When then did he not remain in his state of idleness, if it is lawful to speak in this way³²? For it is impious to think that an intellect and a god could pursue what is less beautiful instead of what is more so. But this is what one must admit, if the cosmos is generated in time rather than co-existing with the infinity of time.

In this passage from his Commentary on the *Timaeus*, Proclus begins by emphasizing that the Demiurge's changelessness implies that he always creates, and that such constant creation also implies that the world always exists. A similar argument had already been put forward by Porphyry³³. Envisaging the contrary hypothesis, that the world began at a specific time after not having existed, Proclus, like Augustine's Neoplatonic opponents, asks why God

³¹ Cf. Hierocles, *De providentia*, ap. Photius, *Bibliotheca* cod. 251, 461a13 *Ei δὲ τὸ ποιεῖν [sc. ἄμεινον], τί μὴ ἐξ ἀϊδίου ἔπραττεν;*

³² Cf. Hierocles, *De providentia*, ap. Photius, *Bibliotheca* cod. 251, 461a11-12: *Ei γὰρ ἄμεινον μὴ ποιεῖν, πῶς εἰς τὸ ποιεῖν μεταβέβηκεν;* Augustine, *Conf.* XI 10. W. Theiler (*Forschungen zum Neuplatonismus*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1966, p. 16) assumes Augustine's source here is Porphyry.

³³ Cf. the passage from Zacharias, *infra*; Porphyry, *In Tim.*, fr. 50, p. 36, 3ff. Sodano = Proclus, *In Tim.*, I, 393, 1-13 Diehl; Proclus apud Philop., *De aet. mundi* 225, 2ff. Rabe, where Philoponus tells us Proclus is “once again copying Porphyry”.

would spend an eternity without creating, only to suddenly make up his mind to create. One possible explanation is that he did so because he thought it was a better course of action. Here, however, two alternatives present themselves. If he did not know beforehand that it was better to create, he was ignorant; but this conclusion is unacceptable, since the Demiurge is Intellect. If he did know it was better to create, however, why would he have not begun to create earlier, or, we might add, perhaps from infinity? On the assumption that creating the world was not, after all, the better alternative, then Proclus will ask why God did not completely refrain from creating, since one cannot imagine that God might have deliberately chosen the worst of two possible courses of action.

Matthias Baltes has already shown persuasively that this extract from Proclus' *Commentary on the Timaeus* derives, as far as its basic arguments and doctrinal elements are concerned, from Porphyry. If there were any doubts on the subject, they should be dispelled by another text from Proclus' *Commentary on the Timaeus*, where the Tyrian philosopher is this time explicitly named:

T7 Porphyry, *In Tim.*, fr. 46, p. 29, 15 ff. Sodano = Procl. *In Tim.*, I, 366, 20-368, 1 Diehl

φέρε γάρ, εἰ γενητὸν τὸ πᾶν, πότερον παρὰ τὸν δημιουργόν—καὶ πρότερον οὐκ ἦν—ἢ παρὰ τὴν ὑποκειμένην φύσιν ἄτακτον οὖσαν; εἰ μὲν δὴ παρὰ τὸν δημιουργόν, πότερον ὅτι καὶ αὐτὸς οὐκ ἦν αἰωνίως; ἢ τοῦτο μὲν οὐδὲ θέμις εἰπεῖν καὶ ἄλλως μάταιον· καὶ γὰρ περὶ αὐτοῦ ὁ αὐτὸς τῆς ἐρωτήσεως τρόπος, καὶ ἦτοι πάντα γενητὰ ποιήσομεν, ἢ ἔσται τι πρῶτως ἀγένητον. ἐκείνο δὲ μάλλον θετέον εἶναι τὸν δημιουργόν οὐκ ἐνεργοῦντα. πότερον οὖν οὐ δημιουργεῖ μὴ βουλόμενος ἢ μὴ δυνάμενος; εἰ μὲν δὴ φήσομεν, ὅτι μὴ βουλόμενος, λανθάνομεν αὐτοῦ τὴν ἀγαθότητα ἀναιροῦντες· εἰ δὲ μὴ δυνάμενος, ἄτοπον τὸ ποτὲ μὲν δύναμιν ἔχειν, ποτὲ δὲ ἀδυναμίαν αὐτόν· ἀφαιρήσομεν γὰρ τὸ αἰώνιον. (...) καὶ διὰ τί μὴ πρότερον, ὅτε εἶδε καλὸν ὄν τοῖς γιγνομένοις τὸ γίνεσθαι, εἶπερ καὶ τότε ἀγαθὸς ἦν καὶ ἠβούλετο πάντα αὐτῷ γενέσθαι παραπλήσια; συνήρτηται ἄρα τῇ μὲν ἀγαθότητι τοῦ πατρὸς ἢ τῆς προνοίας ἐκτένεια, ταύτη δὲ ἢ τοῦ δημιουργοῦ διαιώνιος ποιήσις, ταύτη δὲ ἢ τοῦ παντὸς κατὰ τὸν ἄπειρον χρόνον αἰδιότης, γιγνομένη οὖσα καὶ οὐχ ἔστώσα αἰδιότης, καὶ ὁ αὐτὸς λόγος ταύτην τε ἀναιρεῖ καὶ τὴν ἀγαθότητα τοῦ πεποιηκότος· εἰ γὰρ ἀγαθὸς αἰεὶ ὁ δημιουργός, αἰεὶ βούλεται τὰ ἀγαθὰ πᾶσιν·τὸ αἰεὶ ὄν ἀγαθὸν αἰεὶ βούλεται τὰ ἀγαθὰ·

Well, then, if the world is generated, was it from the Creator – who was not such beforehand – or from underlying nature, which was in a state of disorder? For if it was from the Creator, was it because he, too, did not exist eternally? But this is not even lawful to say, and moreover is in vain, for the same mode of questioning will arise with regard to him, too, and either we shall make everything

generated or there will be something primarily ungenerated. One should rather assume that the Demiurge was not active. Does he fail to create, then, because he does not wish to do so, or because he is not able? If we say it is because he does not so wish, then we unwittingly eliminate his goodness³⁴. If it is because he is not able, then it is absurd for him to sometimes have power and sometimes impotence; for thus we would eliminate his eternity. (...) And why did he not <set it in motion> earlier, when he saw that coming into being is good for things that come into being, since he was good then too, and wished everything to become like himself? The extension of providence is thus closely related to the Father's goodness, and closely related to this extension is the Demiurge's everlasting creation, and closely related to this is the universe's perpetuity throughout infinite time, a perpetuity that is coming-into-being and not steadfast, and the same argument eliminates it and the Creator's goodness. For if the Demiurge is always good, he always wishes good to all things. ... that which is always good always wills good things.

As in our previous passage, the structure of the argument here is dichotomic. Assuming the world is generated (*genêton*), there must (also assuming the Demiurge always exists) have been a time period when he did not create. Such inactivity can only have been due to one of two factors: a change in will on his part, or a change in power from impotence to capability. Yet the former option would destroy the Demiurge's goodness, since, presumably, his goodness consists in his creation, and if he failed to want to create, this can only have been through jealousy. The latter option, that the Demiurge was once incapable of creating but then became capable, is also unacceptable, since such a change in the divine essence would eliminate his eternal nature. Finally, Porphyry ends his argument with the now-familiar “Why not sooner?” argument: if the Demiurge knew that existence is a good thing, why did he not begin creating earlier, since he must have been good then, too, and we know from the *Timaeus* that his goodness consists in his will to bestow existence on as many other things as possible, that is, to make everything else as similar to him as possible?

Finally, our last proof text is an extract from the dialogue *Ammonios* by Zacharias of Gaza, written around the turn of the 6th century:

**T8 Porphyry, fr. 456 Smith = Zacharias of Gaza, *De mundi opificio*, p. 98,102-99, 143
Colonna**

Καλὸν ὁ οὐρανὸς χρεῖμα καταφαίνεται, ἢ οὐ;
ΧΡΙΣΤ. Καλόν, ἦν δ' ἐγώ.

³⁴ God's goodness necessarily entails his constant creation.

ΑΜΜ. Ἀγαθὸς δὲ καὶ ὁ τούτου δημιουργός;

ΧΡΙΣΤ. Πῶς γὰρ οὐ;

ΑΜΜ. Εἰ τοίνυν, ἦ δ' ὅς, καλὸν μὲν ὁ οὐρανός, ἀγαθὸς δὲ καὶ ὁ τοῦδε τοῦ παντὸς πατὴρ καὶ ποιητής, πῶς οὐ τὸ καλὸν τῷ ἀγαθῷ τὸν ἅπαντα αἰῶνα συνέπεσθαι καὶ συνεξεῦχθαι Χριστιανῶν βούλονται παῖδες; καὶ εἰ καλόν, ὥσπερ οὖν ὠμολόγηται, τότε τὸ πᾶν, πῶς τὸ καλῶς ἔχον καὶ ἀρμοσθὲν εὖ λύειν ἐθέλειν οὐ κακῶς; ὅπερ διανοεῖσθαι περὶ τοῦ πρώτου ἐκείνου καὶ μόνου οὐθόλως θέμις· φθόνος γὰρ ἔξω τἀγαθοῦ καὶ ἐνός, καὶ παντὸς δὴ θεοῦ χοροῦ· ἢ οὐ φαίνεται;

ΧΡΙΣΤ. Πάνυ γε.

ΑΜΜ. Καὶ τοῦτό γε ἄθρει.

ΧΡΙΣΤ. Τὸ ποῖον δὴ;

ΑΜΜ. Ἀγαθὸν τὸν θεὸν συνομολογοῦσιν;

ΧΡΙΣΤ. Πῶς γὰρ οὐ;

ΑΜΜ. Καλὸν δὲ καὶ τὸ πᾶν;

ΧΡΙΣΤ. Ναί.

ΑΜΜ. Πῶς τοίνυν μὴ ἐς αἰεὶ τὸ καλόν; εἰ γὰρ ἐν χρόνῳ γέγονε τότε τὸ πᾶν καὶ δευτερόν ἐστι τοῦ δημιουργοῦ (οὐ τῆ ἀξία, τοῦτο γὰρ καὶ ἡμεῖς συνομολογοῦμεν, ἀλλὰ τῷ χρόνῳ), ὡς ἐκ μεταμείας ὁ θεὸς ἐπὶ τὴν τούτου δημιουργίαν ὀδεύσας φαίνεται, ἢ ἀγνοία τοῦ καλοῦ ἢ φθόνῳ μὴ ἀνέκαθεν δημιουργήσας· ἐκάτερον δὲ ἀλλότριον τῆς μακαρίας ἐκείνης φύσεως, εἴπερ καὶ ἐπιστήμων αἰεὶ τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ ἀγαθοῦ ὁ θεός. ἄθρει δὲ καὶ τοῦτο.

ΧΡΙΣΤ. Τὸ ποῖον φῆς;

ΑΜΜ. Προνοία διοικεῖται τότε τὸ πᾶν;

ΧΡΙΣΤ. Ναί.

ΑΜΜ. Πόθεν οὖν ἐπεισφρητέον αὐτῷ τὴν φθοράν; ἦτοι γὰρ κατὰ γνώμην τοῦ θεοῦ ἢ παρὰ γνώμην. εἰ μὲν οὖν παρὰ γνώμην, ἀδύνατος βοηθεῖν, φυλάττειν γλιχόμενος· εἰ δὲ κατὰ γνώμην, ὅτου χάριν ἀπόλλυσι τὸ ἄριστον τῶν γεγονότων; ἦτοι γὰρ καλλίονα ποιήσων, καὶ οὐ δυνατόν· ἢ χειρόνα, καὶ οὐ θέμις· ἢ ὅμοιον, ἀλλὰ παιδικὸν ἄθυρμα τοῦτό γε παρ' ἡϊόνα παιζόντων καὶ ἐκ ψάμμου οἴκους συντιθέντων καὶ λυόντων. τίς γὰρ οὕτω ματαιοπόνος τεχνίτης, ὡς ἐναλλάττειν ἑαυτοῦ τὰ καλῶς τῶν ἔργων γεγονότα; συνάγεται τοίνυν ἐκ τῶν τεθέντων ἢ ἀδύνατον τὸν θεὸν λέγειν, ἢ ἀνόητον, ἢ ὃ μὴ θέμις [ποιεῖν] εἰπεῖν. ἀλλὰ μὴν οὔτε ἀδύνατος, οὔτε ἀνόητος ὁ θεός, πρὸς δὲ καὶ ἀγαθός. ἄφθαρτος ἄρα ὁ κόσμος· εἰ δὲ ἄφθαρτος, καὶ ἀγέννητος κατὰ χρόνον· αἰδίου γὰρ ὄντος τοῦ δημιουργικοῦ αἰτίου, αἰδίων κατὰ χρόνον τὸ δημιούργημα', ὡς φησιν ὁ Πορφύριος καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια φαίνεται.

Do the heavens seem to be something beautiful, or not?

Christian. Beautiful, I said.

Ammonius. Is its Demiurge also good?

Christ. How could He not be?

Amm. If, then, he said, the heavens are beautiful, and the father and maker of this universe is good, why do the sons of the Christians refuse to make what is beautiful follow upon and be joined to what is good for all eternity? And if this universe is, as has been agreed, beautiful, how could the fact of wishing to destroy what is finely disposed and adjusted not pertain to something evil? Yet it is not lawful to think this about that first and unique principle, for jealousy is outside the Good and the One, as it is of all the divine chorus. Does it not seem so to you?

Christ. Very much so.

Amm. Consider the following point as well.

Christ. Which one?

Amm. Do they agree that God is good?

Christ. How could they not?

Amm. And that the universe is beautiful?

Christ. Yes.

Amm. How, then, could what is beautiful not exist forever? For if this universe came into being within time and is secondary to the Creator (not in value, for we too admit that, but in time), then God will seem to have progressed to its creation as if out of repentance, or ignorance of what is beautiful, or jealousy, by not having created from the beginning. Yet each of these alternatives is foreign to that blessed nature, since God is always knowledgeable of the beautiful, and is good. But consider this point as well.

Christ. Which one do you mean?

Amm. Is this universe guided by providence?

Christ. Yes.

Amm. Whence, then, should its destruction be introduced? Either according to God's will, or against it. If it is against this will, then He is incapable of assistance, although He longs to safeguard the world. If it is according to His will, then for what reason does He destroy the best of things that have come into being? For either it was because he was to create a better one – but that is impossible – or a worse one – but that is unlawful – or a similar one – but this is a childish pastime, apt for those who play along the beach at building castles out of sand and then destroying them. For what craftsman would waste his labor to the point of changing those of his works that have been finely realized? One concludes, therefore, from what has been postulated, that one says God is either impotent, or senseless, or what it is not lawful to say. Yet God is neither impotent nor senseless, and He is, moreover, good.

‘The world is therefore imperishable. But if it is imperishable, then it is also temporally ungenerated. For if the creative cause is perpetual, what is created also perpetual in time’, as Porphyry says and truth makes evident.

Here, Ammonios defends the Pagan view against the temporal creation of the world by means of three arguments. In the first, he argues that if the world is beautiful and the Demiurge good, creation must be perpetual. It would be unthinkable for the Creator to destroy it, as the Christians believe: such destruction could only be imputable to his jealousy, but the divinity is bereft of all jealousy. Second, he argues that if the Demiurge is good and the world beautiful, the world must exist forever: otherwise, God will appear to have changed his mind. Three factors could explain such a change on the Demiurge's part: repentance (*metameleia*), ignorance (*agnoia*), or jealousy (*phthonos*). All three options are dismissed, of course, on the grounds that God is always knowledgeable and good. Finally, Ammonios concludes his demonstration of the world's imperishability with an argument from Providence: assuming the latter, if God were to destroy the universe, this would happen either in accordance with or against his will. The second alternative is quickly dismissed, since there can be no question of considering god impotent (*adunatos*). The first alternative, which considers God's willing creation of the world, is in turn broken down into three options. Either he wished to create a better world, which Ammonios flatly declares is impossible; or a worse one, which is unthinkable, since it would imply an evil God; or a world of equal value: but in this case God would be an idle worker (*mataiopoнос*), similar to children who build sandcastles only to knock them down once again. The hypothesis of temporal creation thus leads to the conclusion that God is impotent, stupid, or evil, three eventualities which correspond rather nicely with the three categories of objections, concerning God's power, knowledge, and will, that we saw Šahrastānī attribute to Proclus. Zacharias closes with a quote from Porphyry to the effect that the world's imperishability, as proved by the argument from providence, proves that the world is also ungenerated; and it was no doubt this mention of Porphyry that led Andrew Smith to include the entire passage we have just studied in his collection of Porphyry's fragments.

At the end of this survey, I think we can come to two different sets of conclusions, one reasonably certain, the other less so. Reasonably certain, and argued at length with a wealth of textual evidence by the late Matthias Baltes³⁵ and others, is that that there was a complex of

³⁵ Cf. Dörrie, H. – Baltes, M., eds., *Der Platonismus in der Antike, IV, Die philosophische Lehre des Platonismus. Einige grundlegende Axiome/Platonische Physik im antiken Verständnis I. Bausteine 101-124*, Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1996; iidem, *Der Platonismus in der Antike. Grundlagen – System – Entwicklung. Band V, Die philosophische Lehre des Platonismus. Platonische Physik (im antiken Verständnis). 2,*

objections to the doctrine of the world's creation within time, developed in Aristotle's lost dialogue *De Philosophia* in response to a literalist reading of Plato's *Timaeus*. Some or all of these same arguments, which included the famous “Why didn't God create sooner?”, were later recycled by the Epicureans against the Stoics, some of whom believed that God periodically destroys the cosmos in order to replace it with a new and better one. Finally, in response to such middle Platonists as Plutarch and Atticus, who also interpreted the *Timaeus* to imply the world's creation within time, Porphyry welded these Aristotelian arguments together into a *Beweiskette* which he used to argue for his thesis of perpetual creation. Known to such Christians as Augustine, Philoponus and Zacharias of Gaza, who attempted to refute them in various ways, these arguments or arguments like them were taken up by such pagans as Proclus, Hierocles, Macrobius, and many others, and it is precisely the doctrinal convergence of so many mutually independent witnesses that allows us to conclude to the existence of an intellectual subarchetype in this matter, namely, Porphyry.

Less clear, however, is precisely what Šahrastānī's direct source was for attributing these doctrines to Proclus. He may have been aware of at least parts of the latter's *Commentary on the Timaeus* in Arabic translation; alternatively, he may have been vaguely aware of Proclus' beliefs on the subject through Philoponus' *Against Proclus*, which as we have seen, was available in Arabic, and/or through Zacharias, many of whose works were preserved in Syriac. In any case, from whatever source they may have derived, the arguments attributed by Šahrastānī to Proclus were destined for a long, influential history in Medieval thought, as we can see from their occurrence in Maimonides (*Guide*, II, 14; 18; 21) and throughout Latin Scholasticism³⁶. But that will have to be the topic for another study.

Bausteine 125-150: Text, Übersetzung, Kommentar, Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1998.

³⁶ On the medieval posterity of the theme of “Why didn't God create sooner?” see, for instance, the excellent discussion in Bianchi, *L'errore*, p. 104ff.

