

Averroes (1126-1198)

Averroes, the Latinized form of his name in Arabic: Ibn Rushd, lived and worked in Cordoba, the cultural and intellectual epicenter of Moslem Spain, Al-Andalus. Averroes was a polymath with exceptional gifts who was able to distinguish himself in many fields: philosophy, theology, jurisprudence, medicine, and science, to name a few. Although he held many important official positions during his life, the Almohad dynasty that had conquered Al-Andalus by 1147 practiced a conservative and fundamentalist version of Islam and regarded philosophy as a breeding ground for heresy. Eventually they decided Islam would be better off without philosophy altogether and ordered the offending works to be burned. Many of Averroes' works in the original Arabic were lost and only survive in Hebrew or Latin translation. Averroes was exiled in 1195 but reinstated shortly thereafter. He died in Morocco.

Averroes held that Aristotle was the greatest of the philosophers and it is largely thanks to his commentaries that the west was able to finally come to grips with Aristotle. The Scholastic thinkers were so impressed with Averroes writings on Aristotle that he was simply known as "The Commentator." (Aristotle was "The Philosopher".) Eventually Averroes' interpretation of Aristotle was so influential it defined a school of thought adhered to by many Scholastics that became known as Latin Averroism. (Scholasticism was the intellectual movement in the Christian universities of Western Europe, largely fueled by a resurgence of Greek philosophy – particularly Aristotle.) It is interesting that Averroes' thought became embroiled in a controversy in the Christian West similar to the one that arose in Islamic Spain. But that's another story.

Although the Arab world had a long tradition of reading and commenting on the works of Aristotle, it is hardly surprising that his thought often ran afoul of the religious authorities. Remember for Aristotle there is no immortality of the soul – of course a key Islamic belief. Aristotle also has a proof for the existence of God. But God does not create from nothing – matter, motion, and time are eternal. Since God is perfect God must do the most perfect thing which is thinking and He must do it perfectly so He must think about the most perfect thing, which is Himself: Thought Thinking Thought. This unfortunately renders ideas like prayer and providence useless – hardly a conclusion Islam would accept.

Islamic thinkers tended to turn to Neo-Platonism as a rational means of understanding their faith. It is apparently one of the basic tenets of Islam that the devout should engage in argument to convince unbelievers and strengthen your own conviction in the faith. In general most thinkers at the time would argue that truth is one not multiple or divided, hence faith and reason must be unified. Neo-Platonism offered a picture of God's relationship to the created universe that seemed to be more in tune with Islam and was therefore superior to Aristotelianism. Neo-Platonism's idea that the universe proceeds or emanates from God with matter being the final stage of the emanation allows for a moment of creation. God and all of his attributes are eternal - once we have material "somethings" – created objects – then we have time. This seems to have been the opinion of the Asharite theologians, a sect founded by Al-Ashar (d.945). However the greatest exponent of the school was Al-Ghazali (1058-1111). In his book *The*

Incoherence of the Philosophers Al-Ghazali sharply criticizes Aristotle and supports a version of Neoplatonism. Al-Ghazali is noted for arguing for the idea that came to be called Occasionalism. Occasionalism states that only God can be considered an agent of causation because only God can be considered a creator. If someone moves an object, since the motion is something new a new accident is created (from nothing) in the object (the motion did not exist and now it exists). The motion cannot have originated from the person since a person cannot create. Only God can create. Thus God is the only cause in the universe. Similar to the Enlightenment Scottish philosopher David Hume (d.1776), Al-Ghazali argues that there is no necessary connection between events. If ball A strikes ball B and B moves we habitually say that A caused B to move. But a moment's reflection will tell us that B did not necessarily have to move. It could have exploded, been a hologram, been glued to the spot, etc. Any number of other things could have happened. Now in the normal course of events B does move when A hits it, but we can't ascribe any necessity to this particular turn of events. So the Asharites assert that God is the true cause of the motion of B. The Asharites also supported a version of atomism. This is of course not the sophisticated atomic theory of today but reminiscent of the atomism of the pre-Socratic thinkers Democritus and Leucippus. The idea is that all matter can be continuously divided or broken down until you reach its constituents elements that cannot be divided any further – the atom (lit. can't cut). For the Asharites the atom was the substance and everything else about the atom was accidental – its place, relations etc. All these accidents are created by God and God in this way creates the things of the universe. (The philosopher Leibniz (d.1716), one of the originators of the Calculus, would make a similar claim in his work *Monadology*.) The Asharite version of atomism complements their Occasionalism. Averroes would object to much of the above.

Another Neoplatonist that figures in our story is Avicenna (980-1037). Avicenna accepted most of the Neo-Platonic ideas, but he was equally conversant with Aristotelian metaphysics and offered a unique perspective on Aristotle's proof for the existence of God. Aristotle attempted to prove the existence of God through the fact of motion. Anything that goes from potentially moving to actually moving requires a cause. Now if everything that contributes to this motion requires a previous cause then the number of causes would be infinite. Since you can't traverse an infinite series motion would be impossible. However motion is an obvious fact. Hence there must be a Prime or First Mover that requires no previous mover. Aristotle then goes on to show that this Prime Mover is perfect because it can lack nothing (if it lacked anything it would require a cause) and is therefore God. As mentioned above Aristotle's idea causes the stumbling blocks for theologians in that God does not create from nothing and God only knows Himself rendering ideas like prayer and providence null and void. Avicenna improves Aristotle's proof, as far as the theologians are concerned, by focusing on existence and essence rather than on potency and act. Avicenna notes that essence and existence are distinct – that is, nothing in our experience exists of necessity. In other words you have many attributes by nature, just because you belong to the human species – you have reasoning, sense perception, physical qualities, etc. – they are a necessary part of your being human. But your existence is not necessary. At one point you didn't exist and at some point in the future you won't exist. So in a sense your existence is accidental and therefore your existence had a cause. As we know from what we have already said this chain of causes cannot be infinite in number, so there must be a First Cause. However this is a First

Cause of Existence not simply motion. So God in this version of Aristotle's proof is a cause of existence and is therefore a creator not just a prime mover. We also have the added benefit of expanding God's knowledge. If God does indeed know only himself then it follows He knows all existence since all existence comes from Him. Averroes is very respectful of Avicenna but does criticize Avicenna's idea that there is a moment of creation.

For Averroes the idea of a unique moment of creation, particularly as envisioned from a Neoplatonic perspective, poses many difficulties. If we understand creation as an eternal emanation from God which 'runs out of steam' and in its last stage ends up as matter, then there has to be a moment when matter is formed into the things with which we are familiar. Neoplatonists look at unformed matter as really nothing since we can't say what it is. Hence they can say when God forms the matter into a something we have creation from nothing. In general, Averroes objects to the idea of a moment of creation on logical, philosophical, and theological grounds. On the logical front Averroes is anxious to show that the arguments of his opponents don't add up. That is, since many of their premises are faulty their conclusions are not valid. We will look at this in detail shortly. From a philosophical point of view (and here we should be thinking of something closer to natural science) the idea of a moment of creation raises some knotty questions regarding time. Since time, according to Aristotle, is a measure of matter in motion, then before this supposed moment of creation time did not exist. Then it would seem to be the case that we can speak about before and after creation. But since time could not exist before matter is set in motion the concept "before creation" makes no sense. We could also ask what existed before creation – to say *nothing existed*, if not an outright contradiction in terms, is at least a little strange. We often say things like "I opened the box and found nothing in it." This of course does not mean that nothing was one of the things in the box. It means that there were no objects in the box – an absence of things in the box. Of course if we think about it we realize there is air in the box – we see the bottom of the box – the sides of the box delineate a space and so on. But absolute nothingness, what the ancients called 'the void,' is hard to think about as having a reality. Again most thinkers would call it a contradiction: saying the absolute absence of all reality is real. For Averroes the moment of creation also presents us with multiple theological problems. His main concern is that the bad arguments and ideas of his opponents will lead "the public" astray. Another main difficulty is that the moment of creation idea threatens the perfection of God. God must be perfect and for the classical thinker this meant unchanging. However the moment of creation requires that God change – going from not creating to creating. We can further ask what caused this change – if it is, say, God having a new thought then God and his thought are different which denies the Divine unity – if it is something prior to God, such as a prior cause, then God is not the first cause and we are back to an infinite regress: what caused the cause. In addition, all of this looks like it involves a temporal sequence which is impossible because time does not exist before creation. Since most of his opponents try to demonstrate that creation in time occurred, Averroes thinks they are doomed to failure. Averroes sympathies are with Aristotle who argued that since matter is the substrate of a change and it only changes form then matter is neither created nor destroyed. Therefore the universe is eternal. However it should be noted that Averroes treads very lightly here. He is clear that creation from nothing conforms to Islamic orthodoxy so he prudently does not push Aristotle's viewpoint. (If a book was deemed to be heretical sometimes it

was more than just the book that came to a bad end). Averroes holds that the “design argument” for the existence of God is sound, the public can understand it, and it is in agreement with the Qur’an. This argument states that an order or design is an indication of intelligence. Since the universe is ordered there must be an intelligence behind it. Since the universe is so vast and intricate this intelligence must be God.

Let’s try to look at some of Averroes’ arguments in detail. It is intended that this section be reviewed in conjunction with the text.

P. 19 “The Asharites maintain ... that the world is created in time ... based on the claim that bodies are composed of indivisible parts, that the part which cannot be subdivided is created in time, and bodies are created by its creation. However the method whereby they showed how the indivisible part ... is created in time is an abstruse one (it is non demonstrative) and does not lead to certainty about the existence of (God).”

Comment. Overall we have to note that Averroes is making a logical point: the argument of the Asharite thinkers does not work. As we noted above the Asharite School (the leading figure is Al-Ghazali) held a version of atomism. That is, everything in the universe is ultimately composed of tiny indivisible particles called atoms. (The basic idea is not so different from modern atomic theory, but these thinkers are really influenced by the 5th Century B.C. Greek atomists Democritus and Leucippus who held that you could break matter down to its ultimate indivisible constituents – atoms (lit. ‘can’t cut’)). The Asharites held that these atoms are the ultimate constituents of the universe and contrary to Aristotle it is the atom that is the substance or substrate for accidents. They want to argue that these atoms must be created and that this creation is an accident. Because an atom can’t give itself an accident, all the accidents of the atoms must be created. So for example any arrangement of atoms is accidental and therefore is created and therefore comes from God. So the arrangement of the atoms into objects – the things we experience – is because of the creative act of God. Averroes argues in what follows that this idea doesn’t work and does not prove the existence of God or explain creation ex nihilo.

pp. 19-20 “If we suppose the world is created it follows that it must necessarily have a Maker (First Cause, Creator, etc.). ...however ... We can neither say that this Maker is eternal or created.”

Comment. According to Averroes the Asharites’ reasoning leads to the following dilemma: we can’t say that the Maker is created (has a beginning in time) or eternal, which is clearly a problem because anything has to be one or the other. First, Averroes states that we must admit that the Maker is not created. If the Maker were created it would have to have a Maker and then we are back to square one. What about this Maker? If this Maker had a Maker, then what about that Maker? Obviously we are involved in an infinite regress that gets us nowhere, as Aristotle has clearly demonstrated. But neither can we say that this Maker, using the Asharites’ reasoning, is eternal. According to them God (The

Maker) creates a thing at a particular time. In other words God decides at a particular moment to arrange a set of atoms into some object, say a tree. The problem is that God is one – not composed of parts - and if He is eternal then his action is eternal. In other words we cannot say that one part of God is doing one thing, e.g., thinking, and another part is doing something else, like creating. If God is one then there can be only one action – as Maimonides said. If this action is eternal that would mean he is eternally creating any creature, such as the aforementioned tree, rendering that creature eternal, which is a contradiction. “Creature”, according to the Asharites, means something created which means it has a beginning in time, but you are also saying it does not have a beginning in time because its creation is eternal, which is an obvious contradiction. “Eternal creature” is a contradiction in terms. In addition creation in time would mean the Maker is sometimes acting and sometimes not – a clear violation of God’s eternal nature. Any change would require a cause and here we go with the infinite regress that looks like a temporal sequence of events. Hence it seems that the Asharites’ explanation of creation in time leaves us with a dilemma: God can neither be created – an infinite regress would develop, nor can he be eternal because this would involve God eternally creating creatures, leading to the contradiction of “eternal Creature.”

Now the Asharites try to get around this objection by saying that creation in time happens through God’s eternal will. The idea seems to be that they are trying to say God does not change, but His creation does. Things come into being at a certain time but God has willed this through all eternity. In other words, God has eternally willed that different things come into being at different times – thus apparently preserving the oneness of God since God is performing only one action that causes different results at different times. However, Averroes argues that this is no improvement. It simply refocuses the issue but does not solve the problem because the same difficulties we experienced previously come into play. The previous idea failed because it implied that God and creatures were eternally connected leading to the contradiction “eternal creature.” In this reformulation of the theory the Asharites are trying to maintain the difference between God’s will, the action, and the product of that action – the creature. However Averroes points out that if we say the will is eternal and the action is created we have the same problem that we had above – the connection of something that begins time with something eternal. Saying something is supposedly eternally willed to exist at a particular time still leaves you with an “eternal creature” problem. “I am eternally willing that this thing exists, only later on.” If it doesn’t exist yet then what is it that you are willing to exist later on? If God eternally wills something to exist it has to exist eternally. In addition, to try to somehow separate the created action and created product from the eternal will by saying the product comes to be in the future separates God from his creation because when the action and the product comes to be they at that moment completely disconnected from God’s will. The created thing at that moment is something completely other than God’s will. So we would have to have a product without a producer – clearly not what the Asharites intended to say. We also have the same difficulties with time that we noted above. If God wills something to be at a particular moment in time, then we have to assume an infinite amount of time prior to that moment in creation because it has *never* existed before that moment. Thus an infinite amount of time will have had to elapse prior to that thing’s existence which is impossible. Finally willing something to exist at a particular time represents a change because if God wills it to exist at time x then

that means he wills that it not exist at all other times. Again there must be a cause or a reason for this which brings back our friend the infinite regress and also violates the unity and perfection of God since God is acting differently at different times. Clearly for Averroes creation in time as proposed by the Asharite School presents a problem.

P.21 Averroes discusses the Asharites attempt to deduce the creation of the world using the concepts of substance and accidents.

“The first (method) which is more famous ... is based on three premises ... from which they hope to deduce the creation of the world. The first states (1) that substances never exist apart from accidents ... (2) accidents are created, and (3) that which cannot exist apart from accidents must be created.” (The conclusion being that the substances – here meaning atoms - are created and since these are the basic constituents of the world it follows that the world is created.)

Comment. As with the above discussion Averroes wants to show that there are problems with these premises, and so the conclusion is at least doubtful if not entirely wrong. Again the critique here is logical – Averroes is trying to show that the conclusion – the world must be created – does not follow from the premises. In general Averroes would certainly want to reject atomism since it contradicts Aristotle’s thesis that each thing possess substantial unity – each thing possesses matter and form combined to make a unit – a single entity. An object is not built out of smaller units. For Averroes atomism confuses numbers with the material objects we experience. Numbers are indeed built out of smaller units. For example, we can think of the number ten as composed of ten ones. All numbers can be analyzed or broken down in this way. You can break down a number in a variety of ways but this does not alter the number. Ten can be ten units, five twos, three threes and a unit and so on. You simply add them up and you have ten again. But you can’t break down or remove parts from, e.g., a living thing in the same way. At some point in the process the living thing ceases to be living and adding back the parts won’t help. Hence, saying that atoms are the basic constituents of all objects (3) and equating atoms with substance is not a certainty.

A further difficulty noted on p. 23 is that according to the Asharites creation is an accident(2). If something is created then obviously it did not exist previously and so existence is not part of the substance or essence. But Averroes wants to point out that an accident can only be a part of a substance and obviously the substance must already exist so that it can receive an accident. So the Asharites’ theory has the unfortunate consequence of implying that a substance, e.g. substance ‘A’, had to exist first in order for it to receive the accident of creation. Again this situation is at least awkward, if not an outright contradiction. It makes no sense to say a substance existed and then it was created. If we try to hold that the substances were created from nothing and then objects were created by the accidental created arrangement of these substances, we fare no better. If we understand the process of creation in this manner and wish to maintain that creation is an accident, then since we are going from not-being to being it would seem again that our only choice is to hold that not-being is somehow the substrate that receives the accident of creation. Again this implies the, at least, awkward idea that non-being is real.

Most thinkers would argue that this idea is simply a contradiction. Clearly Averroes is well on his way to proving his point that the premises of the Asharites produce more confusion than clarity.

On p.23 Averroes discusses the premise that all accidents must be created and he casts doubt on the truth of that statement. Much of his argument should by now be familiar. Clearly there is no perception or experience (what is seen) that can support the statement that all accidents are created. For Averroes there is an entire class of objects – the heavenly bodies –which is beyond our investigation in this regard. Time and place are also accidents and we have the familiar difficulties of imagining the creation of time and place – what was going on before time? Where was place created? As an accident place had to be created in something but that something would have to have occupied a place. At best we have another infinite regress.

On p.25 Averroes casts doubt on the third premise which states that anything that cannot exist without accidents must be created. If we mean a particular accident we are pointing to then we are correct – a created accident must exist in a created subject. If we assume that a particular created accident must exist in an eternal subject we then have ended up in a contradiction. We are saying that something must eternally have a particular accident that came to be in time, which makes no sense. But just because a thing has accidents it doesn't follow that it can't be eternal even if the accidents are temporary. An eternal subject may have an infinite series of temporary accidents. This is how Aristotle envisions matter – it always exists yet it takes on a variety of accidents. To the objection that this would involve an infinite regress, Averroes responds that this would only be true with a linear infinity, not with a circular or cyclical infinity. So Averroes would see no problem with matter eternally existing and taking on an infinite variety of forms. Hence this third premise is open to doubt. Thus every attempt to prove a creation in time has failed to be conclusive.

As we saw above, Averroes' preferred argument for the existence of God is usually called the design argument – since the universe obviously operates according to a plan, it has to have a planner: God. Averroes holds that this argument has the benefits of being demonstrative, in agreement with Scripture, and is easily understood by the public.

Averroes holds that the unity or oneness of God is a truth given to us by faith (most religions agree with this principle) and it can also be demonstrated. Basically Averroes holds that holding that two supreme beings exist that are both perfect and therefore lack nothing is incorrect. If they were exactly the same in every respect then they would be identical. Since we are trying to maintain that there are two supreme beings there must be something that distinguishes them – therefore one must have something that the other lacks. But the being that lacks something cannot be perfect and so can't be God. So the proposition that there are two Supreme Beings is meaningless. (We saw this idea with Maimonides.) Thus Averroes thinks he has shown that God exists and God is one.

As far as God's Attributes are concerned Averroes states that the Qur'an lists seven attributes: knowledge life vision will power hearing and speech. Averroes wants to show that God can have these attributes and this does not violate the unity of God. Basically we cannot deny to God any attribute that

we as his creatures possess, but we must understand that God has these attributes in a different way than we do. Since God is the Artisan of all things he must know them and will them as they come into existence, not just as “possibles” prior to existence as the Neo-Platonists held. Existence, whether potential or actual is a precondition of knowledge. And where there is knowledge and will there is certainly vision and life, and we can’t deny God’s power since He is the Creator. As far as hearing and speech is concerned – hearing means God knows everything so he certainly knows what we say and thing and by speech we mean God communicates to us by causing in us certain types of knowledge at the times of his choosing.