



Proclus on the Eternity of the World

MÜBERRA ÇAY
Ankara University

Review Article

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Abstract: The issue of eternity is as old as the history of humanity which caused to consist of sects, schools and idea circles with various discussions in philosophy and kalam. Although the inception of the discussions originates to Aristotle, Proclus is the first for systematically explaining the issue with the help of arguments in the history of philosophy. He is a Neo-Platonic philosopher who was recognized with his work titled *On the Eternity of the World*. Proclus has known as the philosopher who internalized views of Plato, besides he follows Aristotle about the eternity of the world. He tried to demonstrate the issue of the eternity of the world with eighteen arguments in his mentioned work. Ishaq b. Hunayn translated into Arabic nine of these arguments, and Shahrastani summarized eight of them in his *Kitab al-Milal wa an-Nihal*. English translation with Greek originally as eighteen arguments has been published. The work influenced in the Islamic world, especially in the view of the eternity of the world, was internalized by al-Farabi and Avicenna seriously criticized by al-Ghazali. Comprehending the opinions of Proclus on this issue will be suitable to understand the controversies over eternity in Kalam and Philosophy.

Keywords: Aristotle, Plato, Proclus, the eternity of the world, philosophy, argument.

Introduction

The issue of the eternity of the world was begun to be spoken and questioning from the moment that man existed. In both kalam and philosophy had improved various theories about the issue to solve the problem. But rather than solving, the two areas are separated from each other. According to quoting of Ghazali, most philosophers accept eternity of the world; just as the sun is found with the sun, world also is found with Allah.¹ Ghazali points out that thought differently from philosophers and he deals philosophers four of arguments to demonstrate eternity of the world. Islamic scholars have same idea with Ghazali, because they substantiated proof of God on temporality of the world. According to them world is temporary /hâdis (as saying “world” is meant all creations); and all temporaries need creator who will create temporaries(muhdis); thus there is God.

The theories on proof of God they named as Hudus based on temporarity of the world. Hudus theory will lose function when we think that the world is eternal and presence of God can not be proven for Islamic scholars. In reality, both theories separate from each other compulsorily that the issue of eternity of the world is supported with emanation theory by philophers, whereas temporality of the world is supported with ex nihilo theory by İslamic scholars.

The theory of emanation of philosophers is in integrity with eternity view; being eternal of the world removes concept of “will” which includes weakness from God; instead installs him eternal power and creation without any change. According to philosophers’ views, always being creative of God (bi’l fiil) is caused by the view. It is not hard to say that the discussion between kalam and philosophy, in particular Ghazali and Averroes (İbn Rüşd), caused their different God conceptions.

According to the some sources, in terms of the history of phi-

¹ Mubahat Türker, *Üç Tehafüt Bakımından Felsefe ve Din Münasebeti*, (Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi Dil ve Tarih- Coğrafya Fakültesi Yayınları, 1956), 236.

losophy view of the eternity of the world is based on Aristotle²; although we have known that this issue has been addressed in *Timaeus* of Plato before. Shahrstani has declared that Aristotle is the first person argues for eternity of the world in *Kitabu'l Milal ve'n- Nihal*.³ We must emphasize that Proclus is the first person to systematically explained the subject with arguments. Proclus's work "*On the Eternity of the World / de Aeternitate Mundi*" based on 18 arguments was rejected by John Philoponus/ Yahya en-Nahvi (A.C 490-570). He wrote rejection to Proclus that named "*Against Proclus on the Eternity of the World*" and Philoponus criticized to each of 18 arguments of Proclus in his work. The work has been translated into English in four volumes editorship of Richard Sorabji. In our work, we will briefly introduce the Proclus and try to present the views of eternity in his 18 proofs through his work called *On the Eternity of the World*.

Proclus (A.C 410-485)

Proclus, known as a Neoplatonic philosopher, is referred to as Proclus Diadochos in Western sources⁴, and is referred to as Broclus/Ebroklus Diadhus⁵ in Islamic world.⁶ If we evaluate Neoplatonic philosophy in three periods since Plotinus, in the third period we need to mention Proclus as the most effective philosopher. We also need to add that Neoplatonic view has become systematic with Proclus.⁷ Proclus, known for his Neoplatonic ideas, followed Aristotle on the eternity of the world.⁸ When we search "*On the Eternity of the World*" of Proclus, we observe that quotations and notes from *Timaeus* of Plato, *Enneads* of Plotinus,

² Cemalettin Erdemci, "Proclus'un Alemin Kıdemine İlişkin Delilleri Üzerine," *Hitit Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 9 (2006), 153.

³ Erdemci, "Proclus'un Alemin Kıdemine İlişkin Delilleri Üzerine," 153.

⁴ Proclus, *On the Eternity of the World (De Aeternitate Mundi)*, trans. Helen S. Lang and A. D. Marco (London: University of California Press, 2001), 1.

⁵ İbn Nedim, *el- Fihrist*, thk. İbrahim Ramazan (Beyrut, 1994), 312.

⁶ Eyüp Şahin and Haris Macic, "İslâm Felsefesine Bir Adım Olarak Neoplatonizm (Yeni Eflatunculuk): Proclus ve Fârâbî Arasında Metafizik Bir Karşılaştırma," *Ankara Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 5, no. 2 (2014), 195.

⁷ Şahin and Macic, "İslam Felsefesine Dair Neoplatonizm," 195.

⁸ Erdemci, "Proclus'un Alemin Kıdemine İlişkin Delilleri Üzerine," 155.

Methaphysics and *Physics* of Aristotle etc.

The only source of information about the life of Proclus is Marinus who is his student. He wrote a book about biography of Proclus that is named "*Proclus, or on Happiness*". It is said that many of Proclus' works were written in Athens and many of these works have not reached the present day. According to Marinus some works that belong to Proclus; *Elements of Theology*, *Platonic Theology*, *On the Eternity of the World* etc. The translation of the work "*On the Eternity of the World*" which constitutes the basis of our research about eternity was made. In this work, nine of the evidences were translated into Arabic by a translation committee, including Isaac b. Hunayn, under the leadership of Kindi; additionally eight of them were summarized by Shahrastani in *Kitabu'l Milal ve'n- Nihal*.⁹

On the Eternity of the World and the Arguments of Proclus

Proclus established his work on eighteen arguments and tried to prove that the world was eternal with these arguments. This part of our work will be built on arguments of Proclus and will explain how these arguments support the idea of the eternity of the world. Turkish translation of the work is not available yet; but English translation with Greek originally has been published by Helen S. Long and A.D Macro.

Argument 1:

His first argument is based on everlasting of cosmos by sake of goodness of creator. According to Proclus, maker (creator) is good and He designed all thing as resemble as Himself, cosmos also was designed by Him; then cosmos was designed eternally.

Argument 2:

In this argument, Proclus refers to *Timaeus* of Plato about ideas theory as can be seen in notes of the book. He says that pattern is eternal and it must produce eternal copy. The cosmos is a copy of an eternal pattern; thus the cosmos must be eternal.

⁹ Erdemci, "Proclus'un Alemin Kıdemine İlişkin Delilleri Üzerine," 156-157.

Argument 3:

The argument is based on two axioms and a definition that being creator or producer of Demiurge. Axiom one says that whenever the cause actually producing, the effect is actually being produced; second axiom says that potential needs something actual to produce it actually. If definition a Demiurge is one who produces an effect. Proclus claims that by looking at the evidences, Demiurge will produce actual effects, and by looking at the first axiom, the cosmos is the result of Demiurge's actual creation, and therefore is eternal. (In this argument potential and actual creations are corresponding (bi'l fiil, bi'l kuvve) creation view in Islamic Philosophy.

Argument 4:

The argument consist of two assumptions and three arguments. Assumptions; motion is incomplete actuality and anything moved is earlier incomplete, later complete, occupies time. Argument one says that something unmoved is a cause, it produces a necessarily eternal effect. Arguments second says that all must be eternal; and last arguments cause and if we say cause only is unmoved, it will mean cosmos changes and not eternal. Thus we must say that both cause of all and the cosmos are eternal.

Argument 5:

Time and heaven are simultaneous and both must be eternal; neither one is when the other is not; time must be eternal; therefore heaven must also be eternal. Time is measure of the heaven's motion as eternity is a measure of the pattern's life; time is a moving image of eternity; it must always be a pattern for time.

Argument 6:

The argument starts with a question that: "Whether the demiurge alone would dissolve the cosmos"¹⁰ If the universe can be destroyed, only one can regulate or bound it and He can destroy

¹⁰ Proclus, *On the Eternity of the World*, 61.

it. Because of Demiurge is good, he doesn't break arranged things up. Therefore cosmos is indissoluble and so incorruptible; it must be eternal. Based on his propositions, Proclus' definition of Eternity means that no beginning and no end of the eternal things. According to him something is incorruptible, then it is also ungenerated; the cosmos is incorruptible; therefore it is ungenerated. The cosmos must be eternal.¹¹

Argument 7:

The argument is based on essentially source of motion that does not move itself (Unmoved mover of Aristotle's theory). Things that move by themselves must be eternal. According to this principle, the all is moved eternally and so must be eternal.

Argument 8:

This argument is based on generated and corruptible of beings. According to propositions all is incorruptible and ungenerated. And Proclus adds that change in one direction only that is from possession to privation and he supports his view with an example that such change is impossible, as for example would be the change from being blind to having sight. However it would be impossible that the all would again return to disorder, because god wishes order.¹² Proclus considers that God does not wish corruption and disorder, thus all is incorruptible and ungenerated.

Argument 9:

The argument is based on the fact that good is incorruptible and unchangeable; corruptible is corrupted by evil. If the thing (all) is incorruptible then it is also ungenerated. Proclus concludes saying that the all is eternal; he says: "All has not been generated and could not be corrupted; the all is eternal."¹³

Argument 10:

Proclus emphasizes in the argument that whole elements

¹¹ Proclus, *On the Eternity of the World*, 61.

¹² Proclus, *On the Eternity of the World*, 71.

¹³ Proclus, *On the Eternity of the World*, 71.

except the All are in change; only the All is eternal and unchangeable. He supports his argument by explaining changing and motion such as “each element of the cosmos that is in its natural place either remains there or is moved in a circle...” At the end of the argument Proclus reaches the end; thus there are two principles the natural and unnatural; which is a principle even though it depends upon the natural.¹⁴

Argument 11:

The argument begins with a definition, as follows: “Matter is for the sake of the all and is the receptacle of generation.” According to Proclus, if matter were to come from nothing its relation to the all would be by change. The work of the demiurge who made the cosmos from matter, would not have permanence. “The realm of becoming is generated by the demiurge putting form onto matter.” He named God as “divine craftsman” and says that “He makes the cosmos by making form present to matter. Because this relation is eternal, the cosmos is ungenerated and incorruptible in the sense of without beginning or end; as forms are eternal, so too is the cosmos.”¹⁵ As a result, Proclus proves that cosmos is eternal by the saying that when the matter happens, the cosmos also happens.

Argument 12:

In this argument, it is said that the existence of everything depends on two factors: matter and a maker. It is explained that the eternal existence of matter and its creator causes the cosmos to be eternal. In the end of the argument he says that: “Therefore the demiurge makes and the matter is made eternally and the cosmos is eternal.”¹⁶

Argument 13:

This argument talks about to motion and it also says that beings have their own unique motions. Generation and corruption

¹⁴ Proclus, *On the Eternity of the World*, 85.

¹⁵ Proclus, *On the Eternity of the World*, 93.

¹⁶ Proclus, *On the Eternity of the World*, 101.

includes opposites; the four elements have opposites and are generated and corrupted into one another, but the heaven is un-generated and incorruptible. Wholes are ungenerated and incorruptible, in contrast things are generated and corrupted thus cosmos is ungenerated and incorruptible, because it always remains in its proper place without any changing.

Argument 14:

In this argument, Proclus says that the existence of order causes the cosmos to be eternal by two general principles. First principle is: “What is disordered resists order.”, second is as follows: “Order is never posterior to disorder.” The shapes of forms are given by God; Matter is orderly, forms are irregular. Proclus concludes the argument as follows: “Order is simultaneous with matter and the trace. Therefore order is always. From the moment there is order, there is also a cosmos. Therefore, the cosmos is ungenerated and incorruptible and eternal.”¹⁷

Argument 15:

The argument begins with Plato’s paradigm of the cosmos, according to Plato, cosmos is “unique”, “eternal” and “altogether complete”. Perpetual being has holistic forms in generally. The disorder ends in order. The disorder has no beginning, but has an end; the ordered has no end, but has a beginning. “The cosmos which above all else resembles what is eternal, must resemble the eternal paradigm in both direction, being without beginning or end, being ungenerated and incorruptible (cosmos must be eternal)”¹⁸ In Proclus philosophy, especially in this argument the meaning of eternity is ‘not beginning or end’; therefore eternal means that ungenerated and incorruptible.

Argument 16:

According to Proclus demiurge has two wishes: a- that what is disorderly not be and b- that what has been ordered be preserved, then either; these two wishes are eternal. Demiurge wis-

¹⁷ Proclus, *On the Eternity of the World*, 111.

¹⁸ Proclus, *On the Eternity of the World*, 119.

hes disorder in which there is no good; and also he wishes order in which there is no evil. Demiurge wishes order in the cosmos. Demiurge's job is to reject disorder; in contrast to produce order. The order does not consist of disorder; and also disorder does not consist of order, because both are eternal and both do not have beginning or end. Proclus ends the argument by explaining what the universe is. He says: "The object of the wish is order; order is the cosmos; therefore the cosmos is one, eternal, ungenerated and incorruptible."¹⁹

Argument 17:

In this argument, Proclus bases his two principles on Aristotle and Plato and he : "a- everything generated is corruptible; b- everything ungenerated is incorruptible. Therefore, if the all is incorruptible, it is also ungenerated according to both Plato and Aristotle." According to Proclus, the ungenerated cannot be corruptible or the generated incorruptible, because maker is not evil, ordered is not corruptible; if the ordered comes from the disordered. If the ordered is corruptible, then the one who corrupts it either did not fit it together beautifully and is not good, or corrupts what is beautifully fitted together and evil. Cosmos is ungenerated and incorruptible and so eternal.²⁰

Argument 18:

In this argument we have to emphasize some points that "being ever uniform, unchanging and self identical belongs only the most divine of all things , demirge is among of them and he must be eternal. And second point that demiurge always acts and makes and cosmos have either a beginning or an end of being acted upon." And he adds meaning of eternal he claim that "cosmos must be without beginning or end, ungenerated and incorruptible. Therefore cosmos must be eternal."²¹

¹⁹ Proclus, *On the Eternity of the World*, 125.

²⁰ Proclus, *On the Eternity of the World*, 133.

²¹ Proclus, *On the Eternity of the World*, 139.

Conclusion

In our article, we examined the idea of the eternity of the world which belongs to Proclus built on eighteen arguments. Looking at the debates about the eternity of the world through the proofs of Proclus will help us to understand the basics of the debates. The causes of the eternity of the world explained by Proclus such as; goodness of creator, eternal copy of pattern, eternal creation of Demiurge, goodness of Demiurge, unchangeable of good, making matter eternally etc. Therefore the cosmos is ungenerated, incorruptible, unchangeable, one thus it is eternal.

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