

Aristotle in Maimonides' *Guide For The Perplexed*: An Analysis of Maimonidean Refutation
Against The Jewish Kalam

Influenced by Islamic thought, Mutakallimun or Jewish Kalamists began to pervade Judaic philosophy during the 12th Century.¹ In Rambam Maimonides' *Guide For The Perplexed*, crucial tenants of this newly developed sect are ridiculed and proven illogical from an Aristotelean perspective. More specifically, drawing heavily from both Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, Maimonides refutes the Kalamic belief that God's creation happened within time.

After describing Maimonides' understanding of Aristotle's four causes, I will move into a deeper analysis of why Maimonides believed geometrical demonstration was invalid according to the Kalam and its subsequent temporal proofs. While this essay may not expand the readers knowledge of Aristotle or Maimonides respectfully, it will strengthen their understanding of how Aristotle's ideological lineage has warped due to historical advancements surrounding philosophy.

Aristotle's Four Causes

When Aristotle wrote about the four causes in his second book of *Physics*, he thought primarily in terms of the natural environment around him; metaphysical questions concerning the formation of the universe were not extrapolated from his theoretical development of matter and form. While Maimonides does follow in Aristotle's footsteps, he extends past Aristotle's intended causal reach and hopes to explain the concept of 'primary cause' from an ontological perspective.

According to Maimonides, God is the first cause and the first ground (al-illa al ula and al-sabab al-awwal).² This viewpoint is distinguished from the Mutakallimun who believe that God is solely the maker or causa efficiens of the universe.³ Admittedly, the stark distinction between the two viewpoints lacks salience for most modern readers; however, Maimonides makes clear that a world made without God's presence in all four causes leads to the possibility of there being other makers and even the absence of one. For if nothing exists which references God, how is it known that such a being necessarily exists?

As a result, Aristotle's notion of an eternal entity (i.e. spirituality) forming the universe only makes sense to Maimonides if said entity is God and persists through all four causes. Other than this interpretation of eternal spirituality, Maimonides is consistent with Aristotle's work and supports his conceptualization of natural forms. While Mutakallimun and other 'vulgar' scholars believed such pure forms as blasphemous, Maimonides asserted that the forms of natural objects are definitely not encroaching upon Yahweh's territory.⁴ For an object may only be interpreted in

¹ Harry A. Wolfson, "The Jewish Kalam", (The Jewish Quarterly Review, 1967), 544-545

² Moses Maimonides, *The Guide Of The Perplexed*, (The University Of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 1963), 166.

³ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide Of The Perplexed*, 166-168

⁴ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide Of The Perplexed*, 169-170

the mind due to God's existence; all four causes which are necessary for such judgements stem from God's eternal being.

Furthermore, Aristotle's subsections on space and time in Book IX of *Physics* are revered by Maimonides and definitely influenced his dissection of Kalamic thought. As we will see in Maimonides refutation of the geometrical proofs, Aristotelian ideals such as finding the many within the whole are presented within his allegorical writing.

The Jewish Kalam's Geometrical Demonstration

After laying down the core premises expressed by the Mutakallimun, Maimonides systematically refutes their claims and exploits the pitfalls within their arguments. For the sake of this paper, I will be focusing on the first few premises which tie more directly to Aristotle; while Maimonides' later exploitations do reverberate Aristotelian principles, themes such as sensual misrepresentation would be better suited in comparison with a more contemporary phenomenologist. Moreover, this analysis will begin with the Mutakallimun's contentious argument for the existence of indivisible atoms and end with Maimonides' proof against the composition of time in instants.

In defense of the Mutakallimun, the proposed essence of this indivisible particle lacked any measurable structure and was restricted solely to a qualitative representation.⁵ Still, as Maimonides pointed out, their proof of how such particles translate into whole bodily forms ends up assuming a transformation from quality to quantity which ultimately renders the atom under empirical parameters.⁶ While Maimonides himself does not draw upon Aristotle in his analysis, I believe that Aristotelian concepts of divisibility lead to his disparagement of Kalamic ideals. For as Aristotle says, "in respect of size there is no minimum; for every line is divided ad infinitum."⁷ Admittedly, this textual relationship would be harder to assert if Maimonides did not explicitly reference Aristotle in later premises; however, I still do find such parallels to be useful for the scholar regardless of whether Maimonides made them himself. Luckily, in Maimonides following discussion of the Kalamic belief in a void and instantaneous time, Aristotle's influence does not require such liberty from the interpreter.

The Void

Once place was established as a true necessity for Aristotle, he moved on to question the legitimacy of those who believed in a void's existence. For just as place had drawn a logical necessity, it was possible that void would likewise have a reputable basis.⁸ However, after reinforcing the movement of an object being contingent upon a breathable and objective plane, all thoughts concerning a constructed void between objects lost validity.

⁵ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide Of The Perplexed*, 194-195

⁶ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide Of The Perplexed*, 195

⁷ Aristotle, *Physics*, IV, Section XII

⁸ Aristotle, *Physics*, IV, Section VI

Aware of this Aristotelian critique, Maimonides analogously asserts his disbelief in the Kalamite assertion of a vacuum (i.e. void). Finding the vacuum's logical necessity to hinge upon their atomic geometrical representation, Maimonides understands the need for their development of negative space due to the atom's qualitative flexibility. As mentioned prior, an atom only became quantitative to the Mutakallimun when an objective whole was constructed. This necessity of a whole lead them to believe all incomplete objects persisting in some form of negative space. Thus, a tree missing its branches was actually complete in another dimension of space not existent in place.

Conception of Time

Finally, falling into yet another incongruence with Aristotle's *Physics*, the Mutakallimun believed that time was composed of instants (i.e.nows).⁹ While this representation of time is present for both Aristotle and Maimonides, they are careful not to project subjective features into mathematical discussions of distance and continuity. For as Aristotle says, "the 'now' corresponds to the body that is carried along, as time corresponds to motion."¹⁰ Interestingly, Maimonides points out that the Mutakallimun embraced their subjective unit of time reluctantly; for since they followed Aristotle's belief that motion of all matter (i.e. atoms) is parallel with time, and since their atoms are only capable of being quantified in whole indivisible steps, time must therefore also lack divisibility. While Maimonides himself does not answer this question, I am curious as to why the Mutakallimun chose to obey this rule in Aristotle's *Physics* and ignore others. As we turn to the Kalamite proofs relayed by Maimonides for the finality of this essay, I am truly perplexed by how such an anti-Aristotelian viewpoint came out of a sect which apparently consciously read Aristotle. As we will see in the following chapter, this straying of thought may be due to a more or less lack of ideological cohesion.

Acknowledging his own limits of presenting the Kalamite proofs, Maimonides admits that the aesthetic value which typically accompanied their writing is lacking in his exploitation. For from "rhymed prose" to "eloquent language", they dealt with the world's creation in time through a plethora of mediums.¹¹ Given this additional insight into the apparently diverse sect, disagreements with Aristotle may arise due to both the limits of their chosen writing form and the vast number of individual opinions developed. While we will not go through all the creation proofs mentioned in Maimonides *Guide*, the first two Kalamite interpretations will express the diversity of their thought processes.

As laid out by Maimonides in the first proof, "some of them think that any single happening occurring in time may adduced as proof that the world has been created in time."¹² Refuting this claim through analogy in typical Maimonidean fashion, the core principle of the primary cause is evoked. In essence, there must have been an unmoved mover who created the entirety of time

⁹ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide Of The Perplexed*, 196-198

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Physics*, IV, Section VI

¹¹ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide Of The Perplexed*, 215

¹² Moses Maimonides, *The Guide Of The Perplexed*, 215

and space. By thinking of space being created within time, the role of God is inappropriately taken out of the equation along with His presence in the four causes.

Following from this proof, Maimonides states “they say likewise that the fact that a procreative individual is created in time demonstrates that the whole world has been created in time.”¹³ While this proof of similar, it is distinguished from its counterpart by the use of infinite space and time; for the first proof expanded space with each passing unit of time instead of asserting the infinite magnitude of both. This distinction leads Maimonides to give a similar answer for a different reason. In order to prevent infinite regression, there ultimately must be an eternal being incapable of divisibility. Thus, another Mutakallimun proof is debunked through Maimonides’ Aristotelian application.

Conclusion

Just as Husserl commends Augustine for his influential work on time in *Confessions*¹⁴, I believe Aristotle’s fourth book of *Physics* has had similar effect. Quite frankly, without Aristotle, Maimonides and subsequent theologians would lack a foundational outline to explain the existence of God. Hopefully this trace of Aristotelian ideology through Maimonides has proven useful to the reader intrigued by Aristotle’s influence over philosophy and more specifically Maimonides’ rebuttal against the Mutakallimun.

¹³ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide Of The Perplexed*, 216

¹⁴ Edmund Husserl, *The Lectures On The Consciousness Of Internal Time From The Year 1905*, 3

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