

Sketch of a Cosmic Theory of the Soul from Aristotle to Averroes

The cosmology of the Arabic and Christian Middle Ages was essentially Aristotelian. This does not refer to astronomical or physical cosmology—these took the Ptolemaic System as interpreted by the Aristotelian schools for granted. The crucial point is that the universe itself was thought of as alive. The motion of the universe was conceived as consisting in an active principle driving the movement, and a passive, receptive principle that is moved. These two elements of all motion, activity and passivity, are the prerequisite for all life; in this sense the universe is alive. Something that is alive had by definition a soul in the ancient world. In this respect cosmology was always at the same time the idea of a cosmic psychology, a world-soul. This idea of a universe, which is itself alive and which passes life on from the first active mover to the moved matter, was taken as entirely self-evident in the Middle Ages. A purely mechanical, soulless concept of motion, as has determined modern physics and also cosmology ever since Galileo, is completely beyond the cosmological ideas of the Arab philosophers.

This cosmological psychology that can be derived from the ideas of Aristotle can be combined very well with the notion of a living—that is, acting in a reciprocal relationship of active and passive instances of motion—world-soul. This theory was first conceived of in Plato's *Timaeus*, extended by Neo-Platonism especially by Plotinus,¹ Iamblichos, and Proclus, and then developed further in Arab philosophy in the so-called *Theologia Aristotelis* and the *Liber de Causis*.² The linking of Aristotle and Plato also made sense because there was considerable interest to harmonise these two arch-philosophers; for after all, there could only be one truth.

¹ Plotinus, *Enneads IV*, 3, 9, 10. Cf. W. Schmidt-Biggemann, *Philosophia Perennis*, Chp. V, 4.

² *Theologia Aristotelis*, in: *Plotini opera II*, Enneads IV, V, ed. Paul Henry and Hans Rudolf Schwyzer (Oxford, 1977); *Die sogenannte Theologie des Aristoteles*, trans. and annotated by Friedrich Dieterici (Leipzig, 1883); (*Die Philosophie bei den Arabern im X. Jahrhundert nach Chr., Gesamtdarstellung und Quellenwerk*, 12 ed., Hildesheim, 1969); *Die pseudo-aristotelische Schrift "Ueber das reine Gute" bekannt unter dem Namen "Liber de causis"*, ed. Otto Bardenhewer (Freiburg, 1882), new ed. Frankfurt am Main, n.d.