

A POSSIBLE REFERENCE TO ARISTOTLE'S
ON PHILOSOPHY

In his *De Rerum Natura* V. 110–120, the Epicurean Lucretius writes: ‘However, before I shall start to utter my oracles on this subject [to wit, on the destruction of the universe], . . . I shall expound to you many consolations in words of wisdom, lest motivated by some chance and determined by religious beliefs you should be of the opinion that the earth and the sun and the sky, the sea and the stars and the moon are of divine essence and, hence, abide forever – lest you should therefore believe it to be right that like the Giants all those should suffer punishment for an outrageous crime who with their reasoning shake the walls of the universe and would quench the shining light of the sun in the heavens, tarnishing things immortal with mortal speech’. *Ibid.*, V. 156–165, Lucretius continues: ‘[According to some people] it is befitting . . . to think that the universe will be everlasting and indestructible . . ., and that something which by ancient contrivance has been established . . . for all eternity may never be lawfully shaken from its foundations by any force nor be assailed by any verbal argument and thus be overthrown from top to bottom. To pretend all this, Memmius, however is the act of a fool’.

It is contended that Lucretius defends here his Epicurean theory of the destructibility and destruction of the universe against the thesis of Aristotle, advanced in the *On Philosophy*, that the universe is indestructible and eternal. According to Philo of Alexandria, *De Aeternitate Mundi* V. 20–24,¹ VI. 28–VII. 34,² and VIII. 39–43,³ three passages which have been identified as fragments of Aristotle’s lost dialogue entitled *On Philosophy*, the Stagirite not only had insisted that the universe as such is uncreated and indestructible, but, according to Philo of Alexandria, *De Aeternitate Mundi* III. 10–11, which likewise has been called a fragment of Aristotle’s *On Philosophy*, also had charged ‘with blatant ungodliness all those who maintained that the great visible god [to wit, the miraculous and orderly universe], which in truth contains the sun and the moon and the remaining pantheon of the planets and unwandering stars, is no better than the work of man’s hands . . .’⁴ Who, then, are those people who, according to Aristotle, are guilty of ‘blatant ungodliness’?

It is fairly safe to surmise that Aristotle has in mind here the Early Atomists

1. Frag. 19, Rose³; frag. 19a, Walzer; frag. 19a, Ross; frag. 29, Untersteiner.

2. Frag. 20, Rose³; frag. 19b, Walzer; frag. 19b, Ross; frag. 28, Untersteiner.

3. Frag. 21, Rose³; frag. 19c, Walzer; frag. 19c, Ross; frag. 17, Untersteiner.

4. Frag. 17, Rose²; frag. 18, Rose³; frag. 18, Walzer; frag. 18, Ross; frag. 21, Untersteiner.

and Democritus in particular.⁵ This might be inferred from the fact that in the *De Aeternitate Mundi* III. 8, Philo of Alexandria attacks Democritus and Epicurus (whose ‘physics’ and ‘cosmology’ were decisively influenced and moulded by Democritus and the Early Atomists) who, in the words of Philo, ‘insist on the creation and destruction of the universe . . . as well as postulate many [succeeding] worlds . . .’ In this the Early Atomists and Epicurus so to speak are the antagonists of Aristotle and of his theory that the universe is uncreated and indestructible – they are the philosophers who by their ungodly teachings ‘destroy the whole universe’. It is possible that in this connection Aristotle had denounced the Early Atomists not only as those people ‘who by their doctrines tear down the whole universe’,⁶ but had also compared their doctrines with the mythological doings of the Titans or Giants⁷ who, as the originators and prototypes of chaos, disorder and destruction, had been the very antagonists of an orderly and purposeful universe, until they were vanquished by the Olympian gods.⁸

In the light of what has been said above it is quite possible that Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* V. 110 ff., ultimately refers to, or implies, what Aristotle

5. By relying on *De Natura Deorum* I. 13. 33, where Cicero reports that ‘in the third book of his work *On Philosophy* Aristotle disagrees with his teacher Plato’ (frag. 21, Rose²; frag. 26, Rose³; frag. 26, Walzer; frag. 26, Ross; frag. 39, Untersteiner), some scholars have advanced the theory that the Stagirate attacks here Plato and the creationist thesis advocated in the Platonic *Timaeus*.

6. Philo of Alexandria, *De Aeternitate Mundi* III. 10 (frag. 17, Rose²; frag. 18, Rose³; frag. 18, Walzer; frag. 18, Ross; frag. 21, Untersteiner).

7. In the *De Facie in Orbe Lunae* 12. 926 E, a passage which might refer to what Aristotle had said in the *On Philosophy* (see Philo of Alexandria, *De Aeternitate Mundi* VI. 28 – VII. 34 – frag. 20, Rose³; frag. 19b, Walzer; frag. 19b, Ross; frag. 28, Untersteiner, and *ibid.*, III. 10, see note 6, *supra*), Plutarch states: ‘So beware and reflect, my good sir, lest by re-arranging and removing everything to its natural location you contrive the dissolution of the universe and bring upon things the strife of Empedocles – lest you arouse against nature the ancient Titans and Giants and wish to look upon that legendary and frightful disorder and discord [which had been caused by the Titans and Giants, and which Aristotle had denounced in his *On Philosophy* (?)] . . .’ In brief, here Plutarch hurls the charge of ‘blatant ungodliness’ (see Philo of Alexandria, *op. cit.*, III. 10), which Aristotle had hurled against the Early Atomists for their having denied the indestructibility of the universe, against the Stoics (and indirectly also against Aristotle for what the latter had said, according to Philo of Alexandria, *op. cit.*, VI. 28 – VII. 34, in his *On Philosophy* where the Stagirate advocated the doctrine of ‘the proper location’ of all elements within the universe). For, in the opinion of Plutarch, the Stoics, by adopting Aristotle’s doctrine of ‘the proper or natural location of all elements within the universe’, had actually destroyed the purposeful harmony within the universe by excluding the divine providence from this universe. This divine providence works according to the principle of purposefulness and harmony rather than according to the mechanical principle of ‘the natural location’ of all elements. By removing the principle of purposefulness and divine providence from the universe, Plutarch maintains, the Stoics were actually reintroducing that chaos and dissent within the universe which in the mythological tradition had been connected with the doings of the Titans and Giants.

8. According to Greek legend it was the ultimate victory of the Olympian gods over the Titans and Giants which terminated the age of constant strife and brought purposeful orderliness and harmony into the universe.

previously had said in the *On Philosophy* about the indestructibility and uncreatedness of the universe. For it is exactly against the charge of 'blatant ungodliness' (and of having revived the reign of the Titans or Giants) – a charge which Aristotle had hurled against the advocates of the destruction of the universe – that Lucretius defends himself here. In this sense the statement of Lucretius seems to confirm what Philo of Alexandria has reported about the views of Aristotle concerning the uncreatedness and indestructibility of the orderly universe, thus lending support to the authenticity and correctness of Philo's account.⁹ More than that, Lucretius in a way also seems to verify the report of Philo that the Stagirite had charged with 'blatant ungodliness' all those who maintain that the universe can and will be destroyed.¹⁰

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9. In his *Institutiones Divinae* II. 10. 24, which some scholars regard as a fragment of Aristotle's *On Philosophy* (frag. 18, Rose²; frag. 22, Rose²; frag. 20, Walzer; frag. 20, Ross; frag. 22, Untersteiner), Lactantius relates: 'If the universe can perish as a whole because it perishes in parts, it clearly has come into being at some time. And as fragility proclaims a beginning, so it also proclaims an end. If this is true, then Aristotle could not save the universe from having a beginning. Now if Plato and Epicurus wring this admission from Aristotle, then in spite of the eloquence of Plato and Aristotle, who held that the universe would last forever, Epicurus will force from them the same reluctant conclusion, since it follows that the universe also has an end'. In order to understand this complex passage we must keep in mind the following: In their attacks upon Plato's creationist theory which the latter allegedly propagated in the *Timaeus*, the Epicureans (and perhaps Epicurus himself) might have made use of certain arguments which they apparently borrowed from Aristotle's *On Philosophy*. For according to Philo of Alexandria (see note 4, *supra*, and the corresponding text), in his *On Philosophy* Aristotle had charged with 'blatant ungodliness' those philosophers who maintained that the universe had a beginning as well as an end. Some though by no means all scholars are of the opinion that this charge of Aristotle, at least the charge of having taught that the universe had a beginning, is also directed against Plato. Hence it is not surprising that in their attacks upon Plato's alleged 'creationist theory' and upon Plato's philosophical teachings in general, the Epicureans should make use of the 'anti-Platonic ammunition' supplied by Aristotle (provided the latter in fact attacked Plato's alleged 'creationist theory'), although they themselves were also opposed to certain aspects of Aristotle's philosophy in general. But after having used Aristotle in order to disprove Plato's contention that the universe had a beginning, the Epicureans fell back on Aristotle in order to disprove Plato's thesis that the universe has no end (what has a beginning must have an end). Then the Epicureans so to speak turned around and used Plato's doctrine that the universe has a beginning in order to disprove Aristotle's and Plato's contention that the universe has no end. Cicero, *Academica Priora* (*Lucullus*) 38. 119, which some scholars consider a fragment of Aristotle's *On Philosophy* (frag. 18, Rose²; frag. 22, Rose²; frag. 20, Walzer; frag. 20, Ross; frag. 22, Untersteiner), insists that 'Aristotle will . . . say that the universe never came into being, because there never was a new design from which so excellent a work [as the universe] could have taken its beginning; and that the universe was so well designed in every part that no force can ever effect such a great movement and so great a change [as the destruction of this universe] . . . so that this most beautiful universe should . . . ever perish'.

10. In this sense the statement found in Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* V. 110 ff., may perhaps be called a 'fragment' of the lost Aristotelian *On Philosophy*, although it must be conceded that not all scholars will accept this rather unusual suggestion or the somewhat tenuous arguments presented in support of it.

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