Nature Of The Universe: In Relation To Augustine Of Hippo’s And Maimonides Beliefs

In this essay I am going to discuss the nature of the universe, mainly in relation to Augustine of Hippo’s and Maimonides beliefs. This is a matter that is, and always has been, widely discussed between philosophers and theologians over the years; I’m going to analyse their arguments against other scholarly views and thoughts of my own, whilst also attempting to find some sort of clarity in regards to this seemingly unknowable debate.

Augustine begins Book 11 by requesting that God bestows him with the understanding of how the universe came to be. He then moves forth with his argument by initially stating that heaven and earth ‘cry out that they were made’ (Confessions, Book 11, 4.6). Augustine proposes this statement because, for something to exist and not be created, then it must not contain any materials that existed previous to its spontaneous existence, because if it did, then it proves that the material used would have to have been manipulated in order to create something new.

However convincing and logical this initial argument seems, it is apparent that Augustine is arguing his position from the perspective of an empirical view, simply because he has not witnessed something exist without containing materials that existed before that something came into existence, he argues that it is not possible. This argument is rendered even weaker coming from Augustine - a firm Christian believer. This is due to the fact that Augustine should be more open to things existing without the use of pre-existing materials, in the same respect as he believes God exists in the same manner. If God can be an exception to this argument, then why does the universe have to obey to it?

Augustine next thought that, in order to suggest that the universe was created, he would need to propose why there is evidence of a creator. He argued that the God was the creator of all things, and this is evident through the properties of God being displayed through the universe; Augustine wrote ‘O Lord, made them: you who are beautiful (for they are beautiful), who are good (for they are good), who have being (for they have being)’’ (Confessions, Book 11, 4.6)

Overall, it does make sense that all things in the universe, and the universe itself, would have had to have been created by something. This makes sense because the universe did not exist to have created itself, so there would have had to have been something or someone who existed previously in order to create it. It also is logical that the universe demonstrates the characteristics of what the Abrahamic God would have. This is due to the intricacy that is demonstrated in life; an example of this intricacy would be the food chain, which is seemingly perfect to sustain life on Earth.

Moreover this point, if God made all things out of nothing, as nothing existed before God created the universe, then all things are (including the universe) are not part of true reality. It would be impossible for there to be any other alternative for materials, as Scott MacDonald wrote ‘God does not make things out of God’s own substance’ (Gracia, J.J.E. & Noone, T.B. (2003) A Companion to philosophy in the Middle Ages. Blackwell, page 168). The reason why the universe could not have been made out of God’s own substance is because then the universe, and everything within it, would become directly part of God. This would be a problem

as God is described to be perfection and unearthly. If humanity and the universe is of the same material of God then it would be impossible for us to be made in the image or likeness of God, which is how we are described as in the Bible; we are described as ‘imago dei’ (Genisis 1:27). Therefore, if the only thing that existed before the universe was God, and if we are not made from His own material, then we must be made from nothing, which is both seemingly nonsensical and would suggest that all of God’s creations are not entirely real.

In contrast to Augustine, Aristotle believed in the contrary. Aristotle created the ‘argument from matter’, in which he proposed the nature of the fundamental elements which our universe is created with. The argument from matter follows from his argument from motion. Aristotle argued that, since it is nonsensical to believe that the motion had a creation, because it could not move itself if it did not exist, the first motion would have had to have been in a permanent state of existence before it first moved; the motion would have had to have been eternal. This makes sense as it follows the principles of the ‘Law of conservation of mass’ (Antoine Lavoisier, Traité Élémentaire de Chimie, 1789) in modern science. This law states that ‘mass is neither created nor destroyed’ (Traité Élémentaire de Chimie, 1789), and Aristotle identified this idea as his eternal cause for the beginning of the universe. This consolidates his theory, as not only does it provide scientific and empirical evidence, but it also demonstrates the longevity of his argument over the thousands of years since it has been in existence.

Despite the length of time Aristotle’s theory has been credible, it is not without its critics. The most famous of which came from Maimonides, who proposed that motion was a special property, much like Aristotle proposed, but in a different way. Maimonides proposed that ‘Motion is not like blackness or whiteness which are permanent states, but it is the very nature and essence of motion that it does not persist in one state even for a single moment’. (The Guide of the Perplexed, Chapter 13, Philosophy in the Middle Ages: the Christian, Islamic, and Jewish Traditions, page 372). This quote depicts how Maimonides proposed motion behaves. Maimonides attributed it as a facilitator for time. Both motion and time were viewed to be an ‘accident’ of the creation of the universe.

One concept I wanted to explore was the idea of the meaning of eternal. Does ‘eternal’ mean everlasting, or is it something much deeper. If something is ‘eternal’ it could be described to be essentially unchanging. If this is the case, then Aristotle's’ and Scott MacDonald’s theories could be seen to be false. This is because the universe has developed over time. We see the way in which the earth, which is only a tiny aspect of the entirety of the universe, has changed over the millions of years. An example of this would be how the supercontinent Pangea had split 175 million years ago, to form the continents that we have today. If the universe has demonstrated changes and development through movement of planets and stars, then can we logically describe it to be ‘eternal’? I would argue that we can’t.

Maimonides believed that, as a result of time and motion being an accident of the creation of the universe by God, the universe must have been created in a temporal situation, as ‘time itself was one of the things created’ (The Guide of the Perplexed, Chapter 13, Philosophy in the Middle Ages: the Christian, Islamic, and Jewish Traditions, page 372). This is logical because time needs a substrate to act on in order to exist, if there was nothing the time would be irrelevant and would not display anything. If time is an accident of the creation of the universe, then the universe would have to have been created in a temporal state by something that can act in a temporal state. The only logical explanation for this would be God.

Overall, Maimonides believed that humans are incapable of fully understanding the way in which the universe is created, or indeed anything completely truthful about God. Nonetheless, Maimonides proposed that we can still make out some truths of God in a way in which we'll understand. This was an issue for Alfred L. Ivry, who proposed that 'Maimonides adopts kala?m methodology, reasoning from a self-contained logic that is totally removed from any physical, and correspondingly rational, correlation.' The Kala?m aspect of Maimonides' argument weakens his own, as it proposes that everything that begins to exist has a cause. This is demonstrated by in Maimonides' argument, where he describes God to mold the universe like 'iron to the ironworker', 'he creates whatever he wills' (The Guide of the Perplexed, Chapter 13, Philosophy in the Middle Ages: the Christian, Islamic, and Jewish Traditions, page 372). The reason why this aspect of his argument is so weak, is because commits the fallacy of assuming that everything that is, had to have a beginning, and Maimonides fails to provide any logic behind this in the same way that he states that no one can be entirely sure of the way in which God created the universe. In this case, nor can we be sure about Maimonides hypothesis' or attempts at the truth.

On the other hand, it could be argued that the way in which we read the works of Maimonides, in this case, should be interpreted in another manner. H.T. Kreisel proposed that we should 'adopt an esoteric reading of Maimonides and maintain that he attempted to understand Judaism in light of Aristotelian thought - and did not seek to take a position that was between the God of tradition and the impersonal God of philosophy'' (Judaism as Philosophy: Studies in Maimonides and the Medieval Jewish Philosophers of Provence, Chapter 3, page 41). In this case, Maimonides is not attempting to provide us with an account of the creation of the universe. Instead, he is attempting to further explore and enlighten himself and the Jewish community on the characteristics of God through understanding, and critiquing, Aristotle's views on the creation of the universe. Therefore, can we really hold him to the same standards that we would hold Augustine or Aquinas to? Moreover, his arguments could only be relevant to critiquing the arguments that were proposed by Aristotle, because if his intentions were not to answer the question of the nature of the universe, then he is not a primary subject to this question.

After discussing all of the above arguments, the question of the nature of the universe still seems near impossible to solve, as all above philosophers provided flawless proposals. However, I would argue that the universe cannot be described as eternal. My reasoning is that because it does fit the real description of 'eternality', which would include the property of unchanging. The universe can be seen to be in a constant state of flux. Therefore, a more fitting description of the universe could be 'infinite' or perhaps just simply 'not constrained by time'.

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