

# Christian and Islamic Philosophies of Time

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Vernon Series in Philosophy



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[www.vernonpress.com](http://www.vernonpress.com)

*In the Americas:*  
Vernon Press  
1000 N West Street,  
Suite 1200, Wilmington,  
Delaware 19801  
United States

*In the rest of the world:*  
Vernon Press  
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,  
Malaga, 29006  
Spain

Vernon Series in Philosophy

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017964108

ISBN: 978-1-62273-296-8

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# Introduction

This volume constitutes an attempt to bring together philosophies of time—or more precisely philosophies *on* time and, in a concomitant way, history—emerging from Christianity’s and Islam’s intellectual history. Starting from the Neoplatonic heritage and the voice of classical philosophy, we will enter the Byzantine and Arabic intellectual worlds up to Ibn Al-Arabi’s times. A conscious choice in this volume is *not* to engage with, perhaps, the most prominent figures of Christian and Arabic philosophy, i.e., Augustine on the one hand (whose views of time are so often quoted) and Avicenna/Ibn Sina on the other, *precisely* because these have attracted so much attention due to their prominence in their respective traditions—and beyond. Such a treatment would eclipse the variety of voices represented here. In a certain way, Maximus the Confessor and Ibn Al-Arabi emerge in this volume as *alternative* representatives of their two traditions, offering two axes for our endeavor.

The book begins with **Sergey Trostyanskiy**; his chapter “Iamblichus’ Response to Aristotle’s and Pseudo-Archytas’ Theory of Time” offers, as already noted, a view of certain aspects of the common Neoplatonic—and thus, in an indirect way, classical and Aristotelian—legacy that forms a basis for the philosophical “language” of both traditions. We then move to the Byzantine Christian side of this book’s inquiry with **Smilen Markov**’s “The Byzantine Concept of Historical Time: Origin and Development.” According to Markov, the formation of the Byzantine concept of historical time took place through the reception and transformation of Platonic, Aristotelian and Stoic concepts of time. The Byzantine model differs from the ancient and classical ones not merely due to its structure, but most of all due to its epistemological prerequisites and premises, for it relies on the anthropological dimensions of the experience of temporality, and not on the intellectual transcending of the flux of time. This is followed by **Sotiris Mitralaxis**’ “Maximus the Confessor’s Theory of Time: A Christianisation of the Aristotelian Legacy?”; Maximus implicitly bases himself on a mediated Aristotelian legacy and arrives at a threefold theory of temporality, distinguishing between time (χρόνος), the Aeon (αἰών), which is to be distinguished from the notion of eternity as this is usually understood, and a distinct third mode of temporality, for which we will use Maximus’ of-

ten-cited concept of the ever-moving repose (στάσις ἀεικίνητος). The Confessor uses a number of elements from the thought of his predecessors and contemporaries as stepping-stones in order to arrive at his unique synthesis, with Plato, Aristotle and Gregory of Nyssa being some of them—the crucial differentiating element, however, being that Maximus’ understanding of time is dependent upon his ideas on deification and eschatology. After this treatment of Maximus’ theory of time, the Maximian Byzantine focus is concluded with **Dionysios Skliris’** “Syn-odical Ontology: Maximus the Confessor’s Proposition for Ontology within History and in the Eschaton,” focusing on time as *history*. Skliris claims that the point of Maximus’ departure is an apophatic theology, in which God (in-Himself) is beyond not only essence but also being in general. The other side of this apophatic theology is a cosmology in which created being is presented as *lacking ontology*, since it is perpetually threatened by non-being. Consequently, in the Maximian Christian perspective, the locus of ontology is Christology, because Christ unites God who is beyond being with created existence which is not “yet” being. This Christological ontology cannot but be eschatological in character, since it is in the *eschaton* that created existence, which is not “yet” being, finally acquires an ontological character through the full manifestation of the consequences of the hypostatical union.

We enter the domain of the Islamic perspective with **Mohamed Basil Altaie’s** introductory chapter entitled “Time in Islamic Kalām.” Altaie examines the ideas of two leading Islamic thinkers about time, Ibn Ḥazm Al-Zāhirī and Al-Ghazālī. Both thinkers, who may be considered good representatives of *kalām*, refuted the notion of absolute space and absolute time, always considering space and time to be interrelated. Al-Ghazālī talked specifically about the “time-dimension” and considered it to be on equal footing with the spatial dimensions. In fact, many of the properties of time in Islamic *kalām* agree conceptually with the description of time in relativity theory. Furthermore, Islamic *kalām* assumes that time (like space) came into being with the creation of the universe, and therefore they consider the question on “what was God doing before the creation of the universe?” meaningless. Most of the *mutakallimūn* considered time (and space) to be distinct, being composed of finite, non-divisible moments called *anah*. Altaie proceeds to compare these insights with modern physics’ understanding of time and space. Once again moving from a treatment of *time* to a treatment of *history*, in Chapter Six **Georgios Steiris** expounds the teachings of “Al-Fārābī on the Role of Philosophy of History in the History of Civilization”—and, together with that, on the relationship and at times tension between philosophy and theology in Al-Fārābī’s

thought. The volume concludes with **Mohamed Ali Haj Yousef's** "Zeno's Paradoxes and the Reality of Motion According to Ibn al-Arabi's Single Monad Model of the Cosmos." According to this close look into Ibn al-Arabi's work, the *Re-creation Principle* is one of the main notions of Ibn al-Arabi's *Single Monad Model of Creation* which postulates that the cosmos is perpetually being re-created by the Single Monad that continuously and successively scans all possible states of creation to complete a comprehensive instance of space, just to start over a new instance to produce the flow of time and all associated phenomena of motion and change. Accordingly, there is no actual infinitesimal motion, or transmutation; rather than that, the observed objects are always at rest in the different positions that they appear in. This new concept of motion is used to explain Zeno's paradoxes of motion and plurality, and can lead to interesting implications if brought in conversation with modern physics, something which forms part of the author's project and intentions.

The *synthesis* of those approaches on time and history, their *comparison* rather than their mere co-existence in the same book, is left to the reader, i.e., the reader's critical inquiry and philosophical investigation. This is but the first step of a comparative project that awaits its realization; and the first step consists in the very formulation of the possibility of juxtaposing Christian and Islamic philosophies on time directly

This forms part of a project under TÜBITAK's Research Fellowship Programme for International Researchers (2216) at the City University of Istanbul, *Istanbul Şehir University*: I herewith express my gratitude to TÜBITAK and to City University of Istanbul for making this collaboration possible.

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# Abbreviations

	CCSG	Corpus Christianorum. Series Graeca
	PG	Patrologia Graeca, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne
Al-Fārābi,	<i>KaḤ</i>	<i>Kitāb al-Ḥuruf</i> [The Book of Letters]
Aristotle,	<i>Cat</i>	<i>Categoriae</i> [Categories]
	<i>Gen. Corr.</i>	<i>De generatione et corruption</i> [On Generation and Corruption ]
	<i>Phys.</i>	<i>Physica</i> [Physics]
Damascius,	<i>In Parm.</i>	<i>In Platonis Parmenidem</i> [On Plato's Parmenides]
Marcel Doucet,		
	Doucet	“Dispute de Maxime le Confesseur avec Pyrrhus. Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes.”
Ibn al-Arabi,	<i>Futūḥāt</i>	<i>al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya</i> [The Meccan Revelations]
Ibn Ḥazm,	<i>Fisal</i>	<i>Kitāb al-Fiṣal fī al-Milal wa al-Aḥwāʾ wa al-Niḥal.</i>
Maximus the Confessor,	<i>AI</i>	<i>Ambigua ad Iohannem</i> [Ambigua II]
	<i>AT</i>	<i>Ambigua ad Thomam</i> [Ambigua I]
	<i>CChar</i>	<i>Capita de caritate</i> [Four Centuries on Charity]
	<i>CGn</i>	<i>Capita theologica et oeconomica</i> [Gnostic Chapters / 200 Chapters on Theology and Incarnation]
	<i>CMoffCh</i>	<i>On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St. Maximus the Confessor</i> , trans. Paul Marion Blowers and Robert L. Wilken
	<i>Difficulties</i>	<i>On Difficulties in the Church Fathers</i> , ed. and transl. Nicholas P. Constas

	<i>DP</i>	<i>Disputatio cum Pyrrho</i> [Dispute with Pyrrhus]
	<i>LA</i>	<i>Liber asceticus</i> [On the Ascetical Life]
	<i>Myst</i>	<i>Mystagogia</i> [Mystagogy]
	<i>QD</i>	<i>Quaestiones et dubia</i> [Questions and Doubts]
	<i>QThal</i>	<i>Quaestiones ad Thalassium</i> [Questions to Thalassios]
	<i>TP</i>	<i>Opuscula theologica et polemica</i> , followed by number of the opusculum
Origen,	<i>Princp.</i>	<i>De principiis</i> [On first principles]
Plato,	<i>Tim.</i>	<i>Timaeus</i>
Plotinus,	<i>Enn.</i>	<i>Enneades</i> [Enneads]
Proclus,	<i>El. theol.</i>	<i>Institutio theologica</i> [Elements of Theology]
Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite,	<i>DN</i>	<i>De diuinis nominibus</i> [Divine Names]
	<i>EH</i>	<i>De ecclesiastica hierarchia</i> [Ecclesiastical Hierarchy]
Seneca,	<i>Ep.</i>	<i>Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium</i> [Letters]
Simplicius,	<i>In Cat.</i>	<i>In Aristotelis Categorias commentarium</i> [On Aristotle's Categories]
	<i>In Phys.</i>	<i>In Aristotelis Physicorum libros commentaria</i> [On Aristotle's Physics]

## Chapter 1

# Iamblichus' Response to Aristotle's and Pseudo-Archytas' Theories of Time

Sergey Trostyanskiy

### 1. Preamble

Time has proved to be an enigmatic subject for scholars. Its nature, mode of existence, and so on, is by no means easily discernible. In the fourth century BC, Aristotle, in his various treatises on nature and logic, took great pains to spell out the issues pertaining to time, with the aim of furnishing philosophically plausible solutions to the various challenges it posed. His account, along with his entire discourse on nature, went on to become amongst the most influential in the history of philosophy and science. Ever since, this subtle and persuasive theory of time has continued to fascinate, and at times perplex, scholars. During the late Roman/Byzantine Empire (250–1453 CE), Aristotle's physics had become part of the standard philosophy curriculum in both the Athenian and the Alexandrian academies. Voluminous commentaries on Aristotle were produced at that time, carefully commenting on and elucidating the meaning of each and every detail of his treatises. In the third century CE, the "Divine" Iamblichus wrote his own *scholia* on Aristotle's *Physics* (and *Categories*), aiming to expound the intricacies of the subject of time. In his work he followed the tradition of the commentators from his own Neoplatonic School, in particular Plotinus and Porphyry, as well as the Neopythagorean school represented by Pseudo-Archytas, synthesizing in this way various distinct exegetical threads. His "intellectual interpretation" of Aristotle's philosophical themes sought to disclose the deeper metaphysical significance of each topic under consideration. In the course of this, and while attempting to resolve the *aporiai* generated by Aristotle's conception of time, Iamblichus produced an account that paved the way for subsequent generations of Neoplatonic thinkers, including Proclus and

Damascius, where philosophical endeavors were concerned. Iamblichus' response to Aristotle's and Pseudo-Archytas' theories of time will form the subject of this article.

Aristotle had structured his own theory of time around the paradoxes of time discussed in the antecedently existing philosophical literature. Apparently, though, he was not able to fully resolve those paradoxes. The main temporal *aporiai* that have kept on puzzling philosophers ever since are those that cluster around the twin paradoxes of the non-existence of time and the constantly changing instant. At the same time, the many and varied attempts to resolve them have produced what is by now a quite well-defined field of studies. Where the present topic is concerned, these paradoxes, together with the questions they entail, have preoccupied the tradition of commentators and modern scholars. Such questions may be set out as follows: What is the nature of time? Do motion and time entail one another? Is there some kind of timeless motion? Is there a form of motionless but time-bound process? What, ultimately, is motion? Can procession and reversion on the part of self-constituted beings be classified as motion? What are the status and scope of applicability of the category "when?" And finally: does time itself move?

Issues relating to time also perhaps lay at the very core of the agenda of Neopythagorean philosophy. The enigmatic philosopher Pseudo-Archytas in some sense may be said to have paved the way for the exegetical directions explored by Iamblichus with respect to the topic. The idea of conflicting characteristics that define the subject of time, already explicit in Aristotle, was brought to the forefront of philosophical investigations by this somewhat mysterious thinker, and seems to have greatly stimulated the development of Iamblichus' own conception.

## **2. Preparing the Ground: Iamblichus and the Issue of Time**

As Shmuel Sambursky and Salomon Pines rightly note, in the eyes of the Neoplatonists generally and Iamblichus in particular,

[t]he intelligible world has still something of the statics characterizing the One, but it already contains the multiplicity of ideas. The intellectual world is characterized by an ambivalent state, which is partly static and partly dynamic.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Shmuel Sambursky and Salomon Pines, *The Concept of Time in Late Neoplatonism: Texts with Translation, Introduction, and Notes* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Section of Humanities, 1971), 13.

Sambursky, following Arthur H. Armstrong,<sup>2</sup> suggests that since the intelligible world, in the eyes of the Neoplatonists, exhibited differentiation, and since a certain dynamism characterized the “behaviour” of its hypotheses, issues of time, eternity, perpetuity, etc., had of necessity come to the forefront of philosophical and theological developments over the course of the philosophical discussions of late antiquity. A debate over whether it was possible to philosophize—or rather engage in theological reflection—about intellectual beings conceived as partaking of motion (and rest) certainly took place in Neoplatonist circles. Indeed, the Neoplatonist conceptions of procession and reversion presented the intellectual realm as experiencing some sort of dynamism. However, it was by no means clear what this might entail. The precise connection between these ideas and that of motion was left unspecified, and what complicated the situation, moreover, was that the notions capable of expressing the dynamic character of the intellectual realm (e.g., procession and reversion) had not featured in Aristotle’s treatises. In addition, they did not correspond to the types of motion found in the standard Aristotelian classification of motion.

What, then, is motion (κίνησις)? How does it relate to becoming or “coming-to-be” (γένεσις)? According to Aristotle, becoming concerns in the first instance change of place (i.e., locomotion), and only then qualitative and quantitative changes (alteration, increase and diminution). In the *Physics*, at certain points, he classifies these types of coming-to-be as species of motion—albeit that becoming is here predicated of the subject with qualifications, since the subject that moves preserves its essential form while replacing certain non-essential characteristics. The subject thus comes-to-be “such and such.” For instance, it comes-to-be tired, altering a characteristic that previously defined its state (i.e., that of being rested). A formal change, on the other hand, that is coming-to-be without qualification, and an unqualified passing-away, is just another type of change wherein the subject undergoes essential transformation. As a result, a new form is introduced. Aristotle classified this type of change as mutation (μεταβολή).<sup>3</sup> However, in the context of his discourse on time he used the two terms (i.e., “κίνησις” and “μεταβολή”) interchangeably.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Arthur H. Armstrong, “Eternity, Life, and Movement in Plotinus’ Accounts of Nous,” in *Le néoplatonisme: [Actes du Colloque de] Royaumont, 9-13 Juin 1969*, Colloques Internationaux du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Sciences Humaines (Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1971).

<sup>3</sup>Το sum up: “Ὅταν μὲν οὖν κατὰ τὸ ποσὸν ἢ ἡ μεταβολὴ τῆς ἐναντιώσεως, αὐξή και φθίσις, ὅταν δὲ κατὰ τόπον, φορά, ὅταν δὲ κατὰ πάθος και τὸ ποιόν, ἀλλοίωσις, ὅταν

What is time? Aristotle, attempting to make sense of time, defined it as “the number of motion” in respect of before and after.<sup>5</sup> This definition tied time to motion by classifying it as a property of motion. According to Aristotle, time does not exist on its own right but is one of the characteristics of motion, and being in time—of moving things. Time places limits in respect of existence on things that come to be, change, and pass away.<sup>6</sup> It measures the extent of their motion and determines the order of motion (their relation to one another as prior or posterior, or “before and after”).

Aristotle further nuanced his argument by specifying the kind of number he had in mind. He tells us that this number (pertaining to motion) is not one but “the many,” its most basic unit being two, similar to the two extreme points that mark off a line.<sup>7</sup> This reiteration now presents that which is countable in moving things as responsible for establishing the limits of motion. Hence, number here is the limit of motion, or rather, of some particular duration of the moving thing. He notes, however, that setting out the limit does not indicate an actual division of the continuum of our sublunar realm—one that is in a state of motion. By indicating duration, we intellectually delimit (or potentially divide)<sup>8</sup> the continuum in order to delineate the starting point and end point of motion: a state where a new motion begins and a state where it comes to rest, arriving at immobility. The two “nows” initiate and terminate our counting. Whatever lies in between is number as it pertains to that motion. Hence the latter is a “concrete” and composite number—one that fixes the limits of motion relating to the moving thing.

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δὲ μηδὲν ὑπομένει οὐθ' ἑπὶ θάτερον πάθος ἢ συμβεβηκὸς ὄλως, γένεσις, τὸ δὲ φθορά.” Aristotle, *Gen. corr.* 319b31–320a2. Text following the edition Aristotle, *On Generation and Corruption*, ed. and transl. Charles Mugler, in *De la génération et de la corruption*, Collection des universités de France, Série grecque 444 (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1966).

<sup>4</sup>Thus, “μηδὲν δὲ διαφερέτω λέγειν ἡμῖν ἐν τῷ παρόντι κίνησιν ἢ μεταβολήν.” Aristotle, *Phys.* 218b19. All passages quoted from the *Physics* follow the edition Aristotle, *Physics*, ed. William D. Ross, in *Aristotelis Physica*, corrected edition, Scriptorum classicorum bibliotheca Oxoniensis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966).

<sup>5</sup>“ὅτι μὲν τοίνυν ὁ χρόνος ἀριθμὸς ἐστὶν κινήσεως κατὰ τὸ πρότερον καὶ ὕστερον.” *Ibid.*, 220a24–5.

<sup>6</sup>Aristotle, *Cael.* 281a28–31, cf. *Phys.* 221b30–31.

<sup>7</sup>“ἐλάχιστος γὰρ κατὰ μὲν ἀριθμὸν ἐστὶν ὁ εἷς ἢ οἱ δύο, κατὰ μέγεθος δ' οὐκ ἔστιν.” Aristotle, *Phys.* 220a31–2.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 222a10–21.



Number as it pertains to motion is a continuous quantity, and whatever is continuous should, by virtue of this, be infinitely divisible. However, we learn from Aristotle that one aspect of time, namely the “now,” is an extensionless instant—one that, as such, is discrete and indivisible. This extensionless instant divides the present from the past. Aristotle tells us, in the first place, that an instant is not a composite number. Rather, it is an abstract number, the numerical monad (“ὄϊον μονὰς ἀριθμοῦ”).<sup>9</sup> Hence, its nature and the nature of the “proper” parts of time are heterogeneous, and as such, the “now,” according to Aristotle, cannot be a part of time. Again, he holds that the parts are the measure of the whole and insists that they should be homogeneous. Nevertheless, if looked at from a different perspective, the “now” is an element of time of some sort. In that case, then, time is apparently both divisible and indivisible. This paradox tells us something about a key aspect of Aristotle’s theory of time: “Time, like a line, is continuous and the now, like a point, is indivisible.”<sup>10</sup> The “now” is a potential divider and actual unifier of time, an extensionless instant that, nevertheless, secures the continuity of a temporal series. This dual impact of the “now” both divides and unites the continuum framing such a series within the schema of what precedes and what follows. The now is always the same and ever different.

In general, according to Aristotle, becoming entails motion and mutation, while motion (or change) is something measurable, and is ordered according to the schema “before and after.” Time measures the duration of existence of sensible particulars. And the category of “when” assigns temporal predicates to moving subjects.

It should be noted in this context that Aristotle’s categorial schema has been an enduring subject of contention among commentators. Its critical reassessment, for the most part, was commenced in the third century by Plotinus, who launched a massive attack on it, endeavoring to reassess Aristotle’s accounts so as to properly delineate the sphere of application of the categories. He rejected Aristotle’s categorial schema, arguing that it lacks coherence because homonymy creeps into the discourse and makes the application of the schema unviable. Iamblichus, taking Plotinus’ critique of these categories along with Porphyry’s attempted defense as his starting point, elevated the process of critical appropriation of Aristotle’s schema to its highest level so far. A significant innovation was his “intel-

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 220a4.

<sup>10</sup>Ursula C. M. Coope, *Time for Aristotle: Physics IV. 10-14*, Oxford Aristotle Studies 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 18.

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