

Ancient
Commentators
on Aristotle

GENERAL EDITOR: RICHARD SORABJI

SIMPLICIUS:
On Aristotle On the
Heavens 1.10–12

Translated by
R.J. Hankinson

B L O O M S B U R Y



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Preface

Richard Sorabji

In these three chapters, Aristotle argues that the universe is ungenerated and indestructible. Whereas in Philoponus' *Against Proclus* we see a battle royal between a Christian (Philoponus) and a Platonist on the subject of the world's eternity, here we see a battle between Philoponus' Platonist rival, Simplicius, the Neoplatonist of the sixth century AD, and the Aristotelian, Alexander, who wrote around 200.

Commenting at 297,1-301,28, Simplicius quotes the lost commentary of Alexander on Aristotle's *On the Heavens*, just as Philoponus does in *Against Proclus on the Eternity of the World*, 212,14-222,17. But whereas Philoponus takes the side of Alexander, arguing that Plato's *Timaeus* gives a beginning to the universe, Simplicius takes the Platonist side, which had in *Against Proclus* been represented by Taurus, Porphyry, and Proclus, and denies that Plato intended a beginning. The origin (*arkhê*) to which Plato refers is, according to Simplicius, not a temporal origin, but the divine cause that produces the world without beginning, 299,22-3. Alexander and Aristotle recognise that the world is eternal, but whereas Alexander rejects God as its cause, Simplicius is convinced by his teacher Ammonius that Aristotle did so recognise God, 301,4-7; cf. 271,18-21.

Philoponus, in *Against Proclus* 242,15-22, infers from Proclus' account that Plato's God would have to override the natural destructibility of the universe, in order to keep it in being, and this is strongly suggested by Plato himself at *Timaeus* 41A-B. But Simplicius, addressing this view, does not concede it, 361,12-16. On the contrary, the nature of the universe fits it to share in God's benefits.

Simplicius found the 'natural destructibility' view in his earlier source, Alexander. Alexander argued, 359,11-360,3, that what is, like Plato's universe, destructible of its own nature, rather than contingently, is incapable of not being destroyed. Moreover, Alexander sides with those who deny that God can bring about the impossible. Plato himself had in the *Timaeus* put restrictions on God's power, 47E-48E; 75A. God cannot, for example, protect us with thicker skulls, while also allowing us sharp perception.

Simplicius protests that this argument would prove too much, 360,4-

29. For Alexander's leader, Aristotle himself, allows in *Physics* 8.10 that God overrides the natural tendency of the universe to stop moving. Indeed, on the interpretation that Simplicius inherits from Ammonius, Aristotle intends that God also overrides the natural tendency of the universe to disintegrate.

Textual Emendations

- 292,9: Reading *hikanôs*, with Ec and the MSS of Aristotle, in place of *kalôs*, as attested by the other MSS of Simplicius
- 295,24: Perhaps read *kai gar kaiper* for *kai gar kai* (in which case *phêi* should probably be read for *phêsin* in 295,25)
- 298,2: Perhaps read *legoi* in place of *legoien*
- 298,6: Perhaps read *pthartôi* in place of *apthartôi*
- 298,12: Perhaps seclude *homologountos*, or read *homologoumenou*
- 298,32: Reading *huparkhonta* for *huparkhon* of the MSS
- 301,7-9: Marking *alla kai to katêgorein ... to einai ekhein* as a quotation (of 298,16-18)
- 302,33-303,1: Read *ginomenon* in place of *genomenon*
- 304,19: Add *ê gê* after *pur*
- 304,33: Read *kai kata khronon* with c in place of *kai khronon*
- 305,6: Possibly read *kai kata khronon, diorizousan* for *kai khronon diorizonta*
- 306,3: Delete Heiberg's question-mark in favour of a full stop
- 307,21-2: Perhaps transpose *teleioteron* and *atelesteron*
- 310,10-12: Mark *ouden alloioteron ... tèn morphên* as a quotation (*Cael.* 1.10, 280a12-14)
- 310,23: Mark *hoi tês diatheseôs hekateras aitiôntai to enantion* as a quotation (*Cael.* 1.10, 280a18-19)
- 311,2-3: Delete *kai hoti agenêtos kai apthartos estin ho kosmos*
- 314,13-14: Read *kathaper enioi ... legontes legôn; ou gar einai ginesthai phasin* for *kathaper enioi ... legontes legôn; ou gar einai ginesthai phêsi* as printed by Heiberg; *legôn* most MSS; *legontes* E²; *phasin* Aristotle, 280b9
- 314,21-2: Mark *holôs adunaton genesthai* as a quotation (280b11)
- 317,18: Reading *adunaton* with c, for *dunaton* of the MSS of Simplicius here
- 323,12: Reading *diplasia* for the MSS *diplasiôn*
- 323,19: Omit *to de haplôs*, with A
- 324,24-5: *oude to hupothesthai pseudos tauton esti tôi adunaton hupothesthai* should probably be secluded, as in bc
- 326,26: Perhaps read *phtharomenon* for *phtheiromenon* of the MSS
- 328,26: Read *einai dunasthai* with A in place of *dunasthai einai* (CE²b, Heiberg) or *dunasthai* (DE)

- 331,20: Insert *kai to aei einai* after *dioti*; perhaps read *hôte to mê aei mê on kai mê aei on* in place of *hôte kai to mê aei mê on kai to mê aei on*
- 333,13: Read *tis* for *ho ti*
- 336,6: Insert *to* before *aphtharton*
- 336,11: Read *to phtharton* with D, in place of *phtharton*
- 337,31: Read *tôi de* with c, against *to de* of the MSS
- 337,32: Read *to de* with c, against *tôi de* of the MSS
- 340,6: Read *alla hêi* with c for *alla ei* of the MSS
- 342,22: Perhaps add *khronon* after *apeiron*
- 345,35: Reading *tôi E*, with Eb, for *to E* of ADE², as printed by Heiberg
- 349,6: Possibly seclude *ê mê einai kai einai*
- 352,26: Reading *kath' ho* for *kath' hous* (Heiberg and most MSS; *kath' hou* D)
- 359,25-6: Extend quotation to finish after *ex anankês*
- 361,4: Perhaps read *tôn skhêmatôn* for *tou skhêmatos*
- 361,5-6: Read *kai theia kath' hauta* for *kai kath' hauta*
- 361,7: Reading *endidomenês* with A in place of *endidomena*
- 361,8-9: Read *hôtei* in place of *ei*; or seclude the clause *hôs upostas kath' hauton ên*

SIMPLICIUS
On Aristotle
On the Heavens 1.10-12

Translation

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Simplicius' Commentary on Book One of
Aristotle's 'On the Heavens'

[Chapter 10]

279b4-12 Having made these distinctions,¹ [let us say next whether it is ungenerated or generated, and indestructible or destructible, having first run through the opinions of others, since difficulties of contrary types arise in the demonstration of contrary things. At the same time, what we are about to say will also be more credible to people who have already heard the contentions of those who dispute them; for it will seem less the case that our case is won by default. Indeed, they need to be judges rather than legal adversaries] if they are to make an adequate² judgement of the truth.

Having set himself to show two things about the world, that it is unique and that it is ungenerated and indestructible;³ and having shown the first,⁴ he now turns to the remaining one, first of all (as is his habit) examining the opinions of others about the matter, which appear to be multiform.⁵ For some say that it is generated but indestructible,⁶ some that it is ungenerated and indestructible,⁷ some that it is generated and destructible;⁸ for no one has dared to affirm as a matter of opinion that it is ungenerated but destructible. Aristotle always seems to do this, namely examining the opinions of others first;⁹ but in this case he also begins by setting out in addition the functions that this has for us, which are three or four in number.¹⁰ 292,10

The first and most important is that it is not possible to come by the truth without first having confronted difficulties in many forms, as he also teaches in other works.¹¹ And the demonstrations of one type of opinion [create] difficulties for their contraries. For those arguments which seem to demonstrate that the world is generated become problems for those showing it to be ungenerated. Consequently, let him who seeks to overcome the difficulties examine those opinions that are contrary to one another, and the arguments which set them up. 15

The second benefit is the fact that what we say will seem more credible to our audience when they have heard not only our views, but also the speeches in advocacy (that is the demonstrations) of both of the arguments which are disputed and which are the subject of investigation in the case, both ours and those contrary to them. This provides for our audience both the more precise learning [that comes] 20 25

30 by way of the solution of the difficulties, and a firmer conviction,
 since, as we are not ignorant of these things,¹² it would seem to be less
 the case that we secure votes against our opponents by default if we
 293,1 present their demonstrations and overcome them as far as possible,
 which is what Plato does most of all. For no Callicles, Thrasymachus,
 or Protagoras presented his own arguments as persuasively as Plato
 does on their behalf.¹³

5 He says ‘the case is won’¹⁴ instead of ‘securing votes’,¹⁵ which
 means the same as ‘winning the case’,¹⁶ employing the passive in
 place of the active. And he rightly adduces the reason why one should
 not secure votes by default: for, as he says, ‘they need to be judges
 rather than legal adversaries if they are to make an adequate judge-
 ment of the truth’. And how can someone make a judgement who has
 not listened to opposing arguments?

10 **279b12-17** Everybody says that it came to be, [but some hold
 that it is generated and eternal, while others think that is
 destructible just like anything else which has a natural consti-
 tution, while others still hold that it is alternately at some times
 in one condition and at others in another, and that it continues
 like this always, as Empedocles of Acragas] and Heraclitus of
 Ephesus hold.

15 Having spoken of what is common to the opinions of his predecessors,
 he then brings up their differences in this way. For he says that all of
 the natural scientists and theologians are of the same opinion regard-
 ing the generation of the world;¹⁷ but of those who say that it came to
 be, some say that it is eternal, such as Orpheus and Hesiod,¹⁸ and
 after them Plato too, as Alexander says. However, some of those who
 say that it is generated say that it is destructible [too], and this in two
 ways. For some of them say that it is destructible in the same way as
 anything else composed of atoms, such as Socrates, for example, who
 once having been destroyed is no longer capable of recurring.¹⁹

20 Others, however, hold that the same thing is alternately generated
 and destroyed, and having come to be again it is destroyed again, and
 that such a sequence is eternal, as Empedocles says that Love and
 Strife take turns to gain the upper hand, the former collecting every-
 thing into one and destroying the world of Strife and producing a
 sphere out of it, while Strife then separates the elements once again
 and produces the same sort of world [as before]. Empedocles indicates
 these things when he says:

25 at one time all coming together into one by Love,
 at another each borne apart by the hatred of Strife²⁰
 and again they become many as the one grows apart,
 294,1 so far they are generated and there is no eternal life for them;

but insofar as they do not abandon their continuous change,
thus far are they always, and are unchanged in the cycle.²¹

Heraclitus too says that the world is at one time engulfed in fire, at
another reconstituted again out of the fire, at regular intervals of 5
time, in the passage where he says ‘kindled in measures and extin-
guished in measures’.²² Later on the Stoics too were of the same
opinion²³ – but let us pass over them. It is obvious that the theologians
speak of the generation of the world not [in the sense of its coming]
from a temporal beginning,²⁴ but as [coming] from a productive cause,
and they do so figuratively, as they do in other contexts.²⁵ 10

Empedocles indicates that there are two worlds, the one unified
and intelligible,²⁶ the other separated and perceptible; and I believe
that elsewhere²⁷ I have adequately shown on the basis of his own
words that in this world he sees both the unification and the discrimi-
nation.²⁸ And Heraclitus, who also purveys his wisdom through 15
riddles, does not mean what most people suppose; at any rate, having
said those things which apparently concern the generation of the
world, he wrote the following as well: ‘this world ... no god or man
made, but it has been always’.²⁹

However Alexander, wishing to have Heraclitus say that the world
is generated and destroyed, takes this to mean something other than
the current world. ‘For he [sc. Heraclitus] does not’, he says, ‘utter
conflicting statements, as someone might think, since’, he says,

by ‘world’ here he does not mean *this particular* cosmic ordering,
but existing things in general and their arrangement, in relation 20
to which the totality changes into each of them serially, at
one time into fire,³⁰ at another into this sort of world. For serial
change of this kind and the world in this sense did not begin at
some particular time, but has always existed.

Alexander adds the following:

when people speak of the totality as being at one time thus and 25
at another otherwise, they are talking of alteration of the total-
ity rather than of its generation and destruction. Those who talk
of the world as being generated and destroyed,

he says,

as if it were like any of the other composite things, would be
Democritus and his circle.³¹ For just as, according to them, 30
everything else is generated and destroyed, so too is each of the
infinite number of worlds. And just as in the case of the other
things what comes to be is not the same as what has been

destroyed, except in respect of form, they say the same thing applies in the case of the worlds.³²

But if the atoms remain the same (since they are unaffected), it is clear that they too should speak of alteration rather than destruction of the worlds, as Empedocles and Heraclitus apparently do.³³ A short citation from Aristotle's writings on Democritus will make these men's views clear:

295,1

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Democritus considers the nature of eternal things to be small substances infinite in number, for which he assumed a distinct place infinite in extent. And he assigned the names 'void', 'nothing', and 'the infinite' to the place, 'thing',³⁴ 'solid', and 'being' to each of the substances. He thinks the substances to be so small as to escape our senses, and that there belong to them every sort of shape and every sort of figure and difference in size. So he thought that visible and perceptible masses came to be and coalesced from these as from elements. These conflict with one another and move within the void on account of their dissimilarity and the other differences mentioned, and as they move, they collide and intertwine with such an intertwining as to make them touch and be next to one another, but which does not in reality generate any other single nature from them at all; for it is completely ridiculous for two or more ever to become one. And he attributes the cohesion of the substances up to a certain point to the way the bodies entangle with and embrace one another; for some of them are uneven, some hooked, some concave, some convex, while others have innumerable other differences. So he thinks that they hold together and cohere among themselves until such a time as some stronger compulsion comes upon them from their surroundings and shakes them and forces them apart from one another. He speaks of this generation and of the discrimination which is contrary to it not only in the case of animals, but also in that of plants and worlds, and in general in the case of all perceptible bodies.³⁵

25

So if generation is a concatenation of atoms while destruction is the discrimination [of them], on Democritus' account too generation will be alteration. Moreover [although]³⁶ Empedocles does not say that what comes to be is the same as what has been destroyed, except in respect of form, nevertheless even Alexander³⁷ says that he supposes that this is alteration and not generation. And I think that one should note in this regard that none of the ancients who talked of the destruction of the world were saying the same thing as those of our contemporaries who say that once destroyed it can never again recur.³⁸

279b17-21 To say that it came to be and yet nevertheless is eternal [is to enunciate an impossibility. Only such things as we see to obtain for the most part or invariably can be reasonably assumed – but in this case the opposite is the case,] since everything that comes to be is clearly also destroyed. 296,1

Having recorded the opinions concerning the generation and destruction of the totality, and wishing to make a judgement among them, he turns to the first of those who posit that it was generated but is indestructible, among whom were the theologians³⁹ and Plato, as Alexander says. 5

It must be accepted that Aristotle frequently objects to the apparent [meaning of a phrase] in the case of archaic usage whenever in this more obvious meaning it does not agree with the truth. And he does this in order to help those with a more superficial understanding of the old arguments, since [he knows] that the theologians were speaking of the generation of the world figuratively, indicating the gods' ordering [of things] in respect of substance by [speaking] of what is earlier and later in generation.⁴⁰ 10

And Aristotle also knows that Plato speaks of its being generated insofar as it is perceptible and corporeal, because something of this sort, not being capable of dragging itself into being, has its existence as a result of something else which produces it, and moreover that it could not, on account of its being a corporeal substance, be at once a complete whole and yet still be coming to be rather than being.⁴¹ 15

For this reason he writes in his epitome of Plato's *Timaeus*: 'he says that it is generated since it is perceptible, and he supposes that what is perceptible is generated, while what is intelligible is ungenerated'.⁴² Thus it is not generated in the sense of coming to be at a particular time: for it is necessary for time to exist prior to things which are generated in this way, given that it came into existence at a particular time, as one might say six thousand or however many years prior to the present. But Plato clearly states that 'time came to be with the heaven'.⁴³ 20

So if there is a past time which entirely precedes whatever time is taken to be that of the present existence of the entity, in the same way as the future entirely follows it, time will have no beginning or limit, and neither consequently will the world, according to the man who says 'time came to be with the heaven'.⁴⁴ Consequently Aristotle's objections affect neither the theologians nor Plato, but rather those who interpreted the doctrines of the ancients in such a way as to suppose that, while the world was generated at a particular time, it was none the less indestructible. This is really absurd, and well refuted by Aristotle. 25

But Alexander of Aphrodisias does not understand Plato's doctrines as Aristotle understood them, nor does he accept that their 30
297,1

views are in agreement, but having from the outset, so it seems, treated Plato's views as suspect,⁴⁵ just as shortly before our time some people [did with] Aristotle's,⁴⁶ he did not think the view itself worthy of correction, in the way that Aristotle, who does not mention Plato's name at all apart from a handful of times, none the less drags Plato himself up for correction. So it is necessary, and at all events only fair to Aristotle, as well as profitable for those who choose to understand and explain Aristotle's thought by way of his [sc. Alexander's] commentaries, to examine what he [sc. Alexander] said.

10 'For anyone would realise', he says,

on the basis of what Plato actually says in the *Timaeus* that Plato was of this opinion, and that it is not the case, as some of the Platonists say, that the world, although ungenerated, was said by him to be 'generated' in [the sense of] its having its being in generation.⁴⁷ For something is 'generated', in the way that these people want him to have said that the world is 'generated', in its coming to be and being destroyed, but not in its ever actually having come to be.⁴⁸ But in distinguishing the things that are, he says 'what is that which always is and has no coming to be, and what is that which is always coming to be and never is?'⁴⁹ But in regard to the world, he does not say 'coming to be', but rather 'having come to be'. And at the beginning he proposes not to investigate whether it *is* coming to be, but rather whether it *has* come to be or whether it is ungenerated. Thus he says that 'we are about to construct our arguments concerning the totality, whether it has come to be or whether it is ungenerated';⁵⁰ and having proceeded a little further he raises the same question: 'whether it⁵¹ was, having no beginning for its coming to be, or whether it came to be and arose from some beginning'.⁵² And having set himself to investigate this, he proceeds to show that it did indeed come to be, namely that it arose from some beginning. For this was what was at issue; and there could be no [beginning for it] other than a temporal one.

25 And in fact if what is coming to be has not yet come to be, clearly what has come to be is no longer coming to be. But he says that world has come to be; therefore it is not coming to be in itself.⁵³ Further, if he had said that the world is generated in the sense of its having its being in generation, he would have had to accept that it was destructible as well, since for something which is 'generated' in this way, destruction is assigned to it in the same sense as that in which it is 'generated'. But while he does hold that it is generated, he does not allow that it is destructible as well. For if they⁵⁴ were to say that it did not have its being in destruction, he could no longer maintain that it came to be: for this sort of generation is linked to this sort of destruc-

298,1

tion. And if he says that it is indestructible temporally, it is clear that he would be using 'generated' in the sense of 'temporally [generated]', since 'generated' in this sense corresponds to 'undestroyed' in this sense.⁵⁵ 5

Moreover, seeking to do away with the apparent consequence of its destructibility upon its being generated, he says that it is indestructible. So if he says that it is temporally indestructible, he would take this as being compatible with its being generated; however, this is not compatible with its being generable in the sense of its having its being in generation, but in the sense of its having come to be from a beginning in time. Therefore the world is generated in this sense according to him. And to seek a reason for its indestructibility, as Plato does, is, given that he agrees with this,⁵⁶ to say that it has come to be from a beginning in time. For if it were ungenerated, it would contain within itself the reason for and the origin of its indestructibility, at least if he agrees that what is ungenerated is also indestructible in its own nature.⁵⁷ But it is because the world is not indestructible in its own nature, that he attributes its indestructibility to the will of God. 10 15

Moreover, to predicate 'is' of the world is a sign of his not saying that it has come to be in the same way in which [he says] it has its being in generation.⁵⁸ For if prior to its having come to be it was not, while having come to be it is, 'has come to be' is not predicated of it in the sense of its having its being in generation.⁵⁹

I have quoted all of this from Alexander so that those who encounter both it and what I am about to say [may arrive] at a judgement. So, since the bulk of what he said is directed towards [showing that] Plato said that the world was generated not in the sense of its having its being in becoming, but rather in the sense of its having come to be from a temporal beginning, it suffices, I think, to quote a single passage of Plato, parts of which Alexander himself also quoted. 20 25

For having asked 'whether it always was, having no beginning for its coming to be, or whether it came to be and arose from some beginning', he [sc. Plato] replied: 'it came to be: for it is visible and tangible and has a body, and everything of this sort is perceptible, and all perceptible things which are grasped by opinion along with sensation, are evidently both coming to be and have come to be'.⁶⁰ 30

You notice that he says that the same thing both has come to be and is coming to be, because it is perceptible? Moreover, the things which have their being in generation and that which has come to be coexist, just as the heavenly motion is both continuous and always in its end because, since its recurrence is always from the same place to the same place, any part of the circumference you take is both a 299,1

beginning and an end.⁶¹ And it is clear that, insofar as it is always in its end, it has come to be, while insofar as it is at a beginning and is in progress it is always coming to be; and consequently he uses [the term [sc. is generated]] of the world not only in the sense of its having come to be also in the sense of its coming to be.

5 In general, if he proposed to investigate only this about the world (namely if it has come to be and not whether it is also coming to be), as Alexander thought, why at the beginning did he distinguish ‘coming to be’ from ‘being’ but not from ‘having come to be’, when he said ‘what is that which always is and has no coming to be, and what is that which is always coming to be and never is?’⁶²

10 I wonder how it seemed right to Alexander not to take account of the distinctions between being and coming to be in regard to the world in order to discover whether the world is one of the things that [really] is or one of the things that come to be, when Plato had clearly presented them in this way. But since he had distinguished coming to be, but had said that the world had come to be, this man [i.e. Alexander] apparently thought it pointless to take account of the distinction between being and coming to be.⁶³ However, what he said *has* come to be he also says *is* coming to be.

15 And when Plato says that ‘it has come to be and began from some beginning’,⁶⁴ Alexander holds that this beginning is none other than a temporal one. But if there is invariably some time preceding what begins at some particular time (because the moment at which it began and which exists in a present time has a pre-existing past [time] just as it has a subsequent future time),⁶⁵ while Plato says that time came to be with the heaven,⁶⁶ it is clear that time neither precedes the heaven, nor did it have a beginning for its generation at some particular time.

20 We should then note what sort of beginning this is that Plato speaks of, namely that it is the productive cause. For after defining coming to be, he goes on to argue ‘now everything that comes to be must come to be as a result of some cause’.⁶⁷ And again, having said that the world came to be and is coming to be and is generated, he concludes: ‘now what has come to be must, we say, have come to be as a result of some cause’.⁶⁸ And the question is clear to anyone who looks for it: ‘whether it always was, having no beginning for its coming to be, or whether it came to be from some beginning’.⁶⁹ For what is really real⁷⁰ is what it is and has no need of a productive cause, while what comes to be is so called in relation to some agent.

30 And if he [sc. Plato] was talking of this as a temporal beginning and cause, how can he say that this [sc. its existence] belongs to it on account of its being corporeal, taking this as an axiom?⁷¹ Furthermore, although both Alexander and Aristotle before him say that the heaven is corporeal, they do not think that it had a temporal beginning. And this truly is an axiom: bodies that are moved by something

other than themselves have their existence from outside and are for this reason coming to be, because they exist as a result of an agent.⁷² 5

But, he [sc. Alexander] says, if he had said that the world is generated in the sense of its having its being in generation, he would have to say that it was destructible as well, since for something which is ‘generated’ in this way, destruction is assigned to it in the same sense as that in which it is ‘generated’.⁷³ Then did he not hear him [sc. Plato] defining ‘generated’ as ‘coming to be and being destroyed, but never really real’?⁷⁴ For the motion of the heaven and its different configurations are always coming to be and being destroyed, and any substance which alters in respect of these things has both generation and destruction predicated of it. 10

But, he [sc. Alexander] says, if he [sc. Plato] is talking of temporal indestructibility, it is clear that he must also be using ‘generated’ in its temporal sense, since what is generated in this sense is opposed to what is destructible in this sense. But if Plato supposed the world to be both generated and indestructible, clearly he must have taken generability to be capable of coexisting with temporal indestructibility. Yet even before Aristotle, Plato says that what is temporally generated is also temporally destructible, in Book Eight of the *Republic*, where he says: ‘while it is difficult for a state that is so constituted to be changed, still, since everything which comes to be is destroyed, not even this constitution will endure for the whole of time, but it too will be dissolved’.⁷⁵ 15 20

And in general, if what is temporally generated is opposed to the temporally destructible, not simply as being generated, but as being generable and destructible in this way, and what is destructible is opposed to what is indestructible, then since Plato says that the world is temporally indestructible, he cannot have said that it [sc. the world] was temporally generated, since he knew that would be to say the same thing as saying that it was at once both destructible and indestructible.⁷⁶ 25

Moreover, he [sc. Alexander] says, he [sc. Plato] takes its temporal indestructibility to follow from its being generated, and this, he says, does not follow from its having its being in generation, but rather from its having come to be from a temporal beginning.⁷⁷ I wonder how Alexander can say this: for indestructibility is consistent with generability in the sense of something’s having its being in generation, but it cannot [be consistent with it] in the sense of its having a temporal beginning, given that what is generated in this way is certainly also destructible, and that it is impossible for the indestructible to be consistent with the destructible.⁷⁸ 30

And I wonder no less at what he said next, namely that Plato makes God responsible for its indestructibility, all the while knowing that, since it was generated, it was by its nature destructible. ‘For if’, he [sc. Alexander] says, ‘it were ungenerated, it would have in itself 301,1

5 the cause and the origin of its indestructibility'.⁷⁹ For how could he not be aware that although Aristotle said that the heaven was ungenerated, he none the less held that it possessed a finite capacity in its own nature, and that he too assigned the responsibility for its eternal motion, which is equivalent to saying its eternality, to God?⁸⁰

10 'Moreover', he [sc. Alexander] says, 'to predicate "is" of the world is a sign of his not saying that it has come to be in the same way in which [he says] it has its being in generation'.⁸¹ But it is clear that if he does anywhere predicate 'is' of the world, he does so as a matter of normal usage (as we say of both the day and an age that they are), from the fact that, when speaking precisely, he wrote: 'what was and what will be have come to be forms of time, which we unthinkingly apply to the eternal substance, wrongly; for we say that it was, or is, or will be, but for it "it is" alone is fitting according to the true account, while "it was" and "it will be" are appropriately said of generation occurring in time'.⁸² And that he calls its substance eternal because it is intelligible and really real, is self-evident from what he says about the exemplar:⁸³ 'so just like it, it happened to be a living thing and eternal'.⁸⁴

20 I have said these things against Alexander for, while I respect the man and wish him well, I think that honouring the truth the more is dear to him too.⁸⁵ Aristotle, as I said, in setting out to refute the apparent sense of arguments⁸⁶ if it conflicts with the truth, first of all confronts those who say that the world is both temporally generated and indestructible by way of induction,⁸⁷ 'since everything', he says
25 'that comes to be is clearly also destroyed'.⁸⁸ Moreover, if it is necessary ever to posit something without reason or demonstration, those things alone should be posited which we see to obtain in many or in all cases, while in the case of what is now under investigation the opposite obtains, given that everything that comes to be from a temporal beginning is clearly also destroyed.

279b21-31 Furthermore, if there were no beginning [for the present state, but rather it was impossible for it to be otherwise through the entirety of past time, it will be impossible for it to change. For there will be some cause [of it] which, had it obtained earlier, would have made what could not be otherwise capable of being otherwise. And if the world was composed from things which were formerly otherwise disposed, then if they were always thus and incapable of being otherwise disposed it would never have come to be; while if it did come to be, then clearly these things were capable of being otherwise disposed and were not always thus, so that what has been composed will be dissolved, and it was composed out of things which were previously in a state of dissolution. And this has either taken

place an infinite number of times, or is capable of so doing. But if this is true, it will not be indestructible, if it either at one time has been,] or is capable of being, otherwise disposed. 30

Having shown by induction that it is impossible for something which has come to be from a temporal beginning to be indestructible, he now shows the same thing by other means.

He confronts the hypothesis which holds that the world was generated from things which previously had a different disposition and which then changed into this world, and he adopts at the outset of the demonstration the axiom which holds that, if something does not have a beginning and the capacity for changing into something so that it is potentially the thing into which it changes, but rather is such that it cannot be otherwise disposed throughout the whole of eternity, then it is impossible for it to change. For if it were to change, there must certainly inhere in it some capacity in virtue of which it is also able to be otherwise disposed. For in everything which changes, the capacity, or thing potentially, is prior to the actuality.⁸⁹ 5

Having made this assumption, he applies it to the world. For if the world had come to be from some temporal beginning, and had been composed out of things (for instance, as it might be, from the elements) that were previously otherwise disposed, then, if they are always the same as they were previously, and [if they are] incapable of being otherwise, the world would not have been generated from them (since they did not change their prior state). But if the world has been generated in the manner described by the hypothesis, then the opposite of the premiss is also true, namely that the things out of which it is [composed] must be capable of being otherwise and cannot always be the way they were at the beginning, so that what was previously dissolved will be composed [again]. 10

And if these things are what were composed, namely things that were in actuality dissolved and had the capacity for not always being disposed in the same way, it is clear that even after the [process of] composition they did not lose their nature, namely their ability to exist in a dissolved state and their capacity for not being always disposed in the same way. Consequently what has been composed *will* be dissolved, and the world will not be indestructible (given that it is assumed to be generable), but will be dissolved into those parts from which it was composed.⁹⁰ And not once only or twice – for why [should it be], given that the things from which it is [made] are assumed to be ungenerated, or at all events indestructible? No, it was either thus or capable of being otherwise an infinite number of times. 15 20

And if this is case, it will not be indestructible. For what has changed and come to be from things which were once otherwise disposed cannot be indestructible since there remains, in those things from which it came to be and [still] is [constituted], the capacity for

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