

Ibn Rushd (Averroës) (12th c.)

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Ibn Rushd (1126-1198), known in the west as Averroës, was a famed Islamic philosopher from Cordoba, Spain. Ibn Rushd asserted that knowledge can come in two ways, from religion and faith, but also from reason. Ibn Rushd was exiled for his teachings, but his writings had great influence on Christian education and philosophy. In this selection, Ibn Rushd discusses the creation of the universe in the context of faith and reason.

Problem First: the Creation of the Universe.

The Law teaches that the universe was invented and created by God, and that it did not come into being by chance or by itself. The method adopted by the Law for proving this is not the one upon which the Asharites have depended. For we have already shown that those methods are not specially certain for the learned, nor common enough to satisfy all the classes of men. The methods which are really serviceable are those which have a very few premises, and the results of which fall very near to the commonly known ideas. But in instructing the common people the Law does not favor statements composed of long and complete reasoning, based upon different problems. So everyone who, in teaching them, adopts a different course, and interprets the Law according to it, has lost sight of its purpose and gone astray from the true path. And so also, the Law in giving illustrations for its reasoning uses only those which are present before us.

Whatever has been thought necessary for the common people to know, has been explained to them by the nearest available examples, as in the case of the day of Judgment. But whatever was unnecessary for them to know, they have been told that it was beyond their knowledge, as the words of God about the Soul [Qur'an 22.85]. Now that we have established this, it is necessary that the method adopted by the Law for teaching the creation of the universe to the common people be such as would be acknowledged by all. It is also necessary that since there cannot be found anything present to illustrate the creation of the universe the Law must have used the examples of the creation of things in the visible world.

So the method adopted by Law is that the universe was made by God. If we look intently into the verse pertaining to this subject we shall see that the method adopted is that of divine solicitude, which we know to be one of those which prove the existence of God. When a man sees a thing made in a certain shape, proportion and fashion, for a particular advantage is derived from it, and purpose which is to be attained, so that it becomes clear to him, that had it not been found in that shape, and proportion, then that advantage would have been wanting in it, he comes to know for

certain that there is a maker of that thing, and that he had made it in that shape and proportion, for a set purpose. For it is not possible that all those qualities serving that purpose be collected in that thing by chance alone. For instance, if a man sees a stone on the ground in a shape fit for sitting, and finds its proportions and fashion of the same kind, then he would come to know that it was made by a maker, and that he had made it and placed it there. But when he sees nothing in it which may have made it fit for sitting then he becomes certain that its existence in the place was by chance only, without its being fashioned by any maker.

Such is also the case with the whole of the universe. For when a man sees the sun, the moon, and all the stars, which are the cause of the four seasons; of days and nights, of rain, water and winds, of the inhabitation of the parts of the earth, of the existence of man, and of the being of all the animals and the plants and of the earth being fit for the habitation of a man, and other animals living in it; and the water fit for the animals living in it; and the air fit for birds, and if there be anything amiss in this creation and edifice, the whole world would come to confusion and disorder, then he would come to know with certainty that it is not possible that this harmony in it for the different members of the universe — man, animals, and plants — be found by chance only.

He will know that there is one who determined it, and so one who made it by intention, and that is God, exalted and magnified may He be. He would know with certainty that the universe is a created thing, for he would necessarily think that it is not possible that in it should be found all this harmony, if it be not made by someone, and had come into existence by chance alone. This kind of argument, is quite definite and at the same time clear, and some have mentioned it here. It is based upon two principles which are acknowledged by all. One of them being, that the universe, with all its component parts, is found fit for the existence of man and things; secondly, that which is found suitable in all its parts, for a single purpose, leading to a single goal, is necessarily a created thing. So those two principles lead us naturally to admit that the universe is a created thing, and that there is a maker of it. Hence "the argument of analogy" leads to two things at one and the same time, and that is why it is the best argument for proving the existence of God. This kind of reasoning is also found in the Qur'an in many verses in which the creation of the universe is mentioned.

For instance, "Have We not made the earth a bed, and the mountains for shelter to fix the same? And have We not created you of two sexes; and appointed your sleep for rest and made the night a garment to cover you, and destined the day to a gaining of a livelihood; and built over you seven heavens, and placed therein a burning lamp? And do We not send down from the clouds pressing forth rain, water pouring down in abundance, that We may hereby produce corn and herbs, and gardens planted thick with trees" [Qur'an 77.3ff]. If we ponder over this verse it would be found that our attention has been called to the suitability of the different parts of the universe for the existence of man. In the very beginning we are informed of a fact well-known to all — and that is that the earth has been created in a way which has made it suitable for our existence. Had it been unstable, or of any other shape, or in any other place, or not of the present proportion, it would not have been possible to be here, or at all created on it. All this is included in the words, "Have We not made the earth a bed for you"? for in a bed are collected together all the qualities of shape, tranquility, and peace, to which may be added those of smoothness and softness.

So how strange is this wonderful work and how excellent this blessedness, and how wonderful this collection of all the qualities! This is so because in the word mihad (bed) are brought together all those qualities, which are found in the earth, rendering it suitable for the existence of man. It is a thing which becomes clear to the learned after much learning and a long time, "But God will appropriate His mercy unto whom He pleases [Qur'an 2.99]. Then as to the divine words, "And the mountains for stakes," — they tell us of the advantage to be found in the tranquility of the earth on account of the mountains. For had the earth been created smaller than it is now, that is, without mountains, it would have been quivered by the motion of other elements, the water and the air, and would have been shaken and thus displaced. This would naturally have been the cause of the destruction of the animal world. So when its tranquility is in harmony with those living on it, it did not come into being by chance alone, but was made by someone's intention, and determination. Certainly it was made by One who intended it, and determined it, for the sake of those living on it.

Then He calls our attention to the suitability of the existence of night and day for animals. He says "And made the night a garment to cover you; and destined the day to a gaining of your livelihood." He means to say that He has made the night like a covering and clothing for all the things, from the heat of the sun. For had there been no setting of the sun at night, all the things, whose life has been made dependent upon the sun, would have perished — that is, the animals and the plants. As clothing protects the people from the heat of the sun, in addition to its being a covering, so God likened the night to it. This is one of the most beautiful of the metaphors. There is also another advantage in the night for the animals: their sleep in it is very deep, after the setting of the sun, which keeps faculties in motion, that is, wide awake. So God has said, "And appointed your sleep for rest, " on account of the darkness of the night. Then He says, "And built over you seven heavens, and placed therein a burning lamp." Here by the word building He means their creation, and their harmony with the created things, and their arrangement and system. By strength He means that power of revolution and motion which is never slackened, and never overtaken by fatigue; and they never fall like other roofs and high edifices. To this refer the words of God, "And made the heaven a roof well-supported" [Qur'an 21.33]. By all this He shows their fitness in number, shape, fashion, and movement, for the existence of those who live on the earth round it. Were one of the heavenly bodies, not to speak of all, to stop for a moment all would be chaos on the face of the earth. Some people think the blast of the last trumpet, which will be the cause of the thunderbolt, will be nothing but a stop in the revolution of the heavenly bodies.

Then He tells us of the advantage of the sun for those living on the earth and says, "And placed therein a burning lamp. " He calls it a lamp because in reality it is all darkness, and light covers the darkness of the night, and if there be no lamp, man can get no advantage out of his sense of sight at nighttime; and in the same way if there were no sun the animals can have no benefit of their sense of seeing. He calls our attention to this advantage of the suns ignoring others because it is the noblest of all the advantages and the most-apparent of all. Then He tells us of His kindness in sending down rain, for the sake of the plants and the animals. The coming down of rain in an appointed proportion, and at an appointed season, for the cultivated fields cannot be by chance alone, but is the result of divine solicitude for us all. So He says, "And do We not send down from the clouds pressing forth rain, water pouring down in abundance that We may hereby produce corn and herbs, and gardens planted thick with trees."

There are many verses of the Qur'an on this subject. For instance, He says, "Do you not see how God has created the seven heavens, one above another, and has placed the moon therein for a light, and has appointed the sun for a taper? God has also provided and caused you to bring forth wheat from the earth" [Qur'an 71.14-16]. If we were to count all such verses and comment upon them showing the kindness of the Creator for the created, it would take too many volumes. We do not intend to do it in this book. If God should grant us life and leisure we shall write a book to show the kindness of God to which He has called our attention.

It should be known that this kind of argument is just contrary to that which the Asharites think leads to the knowledge of God. They think that the creation does not lead us to the knowledge of God through any of His goodness, but through possibility, that is, the possibility which is found in all things, which we can understand to be of his shape or of quite a contrary one. But if this possibility be found alike in both the cases, then there is no wisdom in the creation of the universe, and there is found no harmony between man and the parts of it. For, as they think, if it is possible for the things to have any other form than they have now, then there can exist no harmony between man and other existent things by the creation of which God has obliged man and commanded him to be thankful to Him. This opinion, by which the creation of man, as a part of the universe, is just as possible, for instance, as his creation in the void, is like the opinion of those who say that man exists but he could have been created in quite a different shape, and yet could perform actions like a man. According to them it is also possible that he may have formed the part of another universe quite different from the existing one. In that case the blessing of the universe can have no obligation for man, for they are not necessary for his purpose. Hence man is quite careless of them and they of him. So their existence is no blessing to him. This is all against the nature of man.

On the whole, a man who denies the existence of the effects arranged according to the causes in the question of arts, or whose wisdom cannot understand it, then he has no knowledge of the art of its Maker. So also a man who denies the existence of an order of effects in accordance with causes in this universe, denies the existence of the Creator altogether. Their saying that God is above these causes, and that they cannot have any bearing on the effects by His command, is very far from the true nature of philosophy, nay, it is a destroyer of it. For if it is possible to have the same effects with other than the prescribed causes just in the same degree as by them, then where is the greatness in producing the effects from the known Causes? It is so because the effects from the causes have one of the following three reasons. Either the existence of the causes will be in place of the effects by compulsion, as a man's taking his food; or their being more perfect, that is, the effect becoming better and more perfect through them, as a man's having two eyes, or they may have neither a better nor a more compulsive effect. In this case the existence of the effect and the cause would be by chance, without any intention at all; and, hence, there would be no greatness found in it.

For instance, if the shape of a human hand, the number of the fingers, and their length be neither necessary nor adding any perfection in its work in seizing things of different kind, then the actions of the hand from this shape, and number of parts, would be by chance alone. If it be so, then it makes no difference whether a man is given a hand or a hoof, or something else, like the different animals, for their particular actions. On the whole, if we ignore the causes and their effects, then there remains nothing to refute the arguments of those who believe in the creation of

the universe by chance alone, that is, those who say that there is no Creator at all, and that which has come into being in this universe is the result of material causes. For taking one of the two alternatives it is not more possible that it may have happened by chance, than done by an independent Actor. So when the Asharites say that the existence of one or more possibilities shows that there is a particular Maker of these things, they can answer and say that the existence of things by one of these possibilities was by chance alone, for intention works as one of the causes, and that which happens without any means or cause is by chance. We see that many things come into being in this way. For example, the elements mix together by chance, and then by this unintentional mixing there is produced a new thing. They mix again, and this quite unintentionally produces quite a new thing. In this way every kind of creation may be said to have come into existence by chance.

We say that it is necessary that there be found order and arrangement, the more perfect and finished than what can be imagined. This mixing together of elements is limited and prearranged, and things produced by them are sure to happen, and no disorder has ever happened in them. But all this could not happen by chance alone, for that which happens in this way by chance is of the least value. It is to this that God refers, "It is the work of the Lord, who has rightly disposed all things" [Qur'an 27.90]. I would like to know what completeness can be found in things made by chance, for such things are by no means better than their opposites. To this God refers in the following words, "You cannot see in the Creation of the most Merciful any unfitness or disproportion. Lift your eyes again to heaven, and look whether you see any flaw" [Qur'an 67.3]. But what defect can be greater than that all the things can be found with any other quality than they really possess. For the non-existent quality may be better than the existing one. In this way, if one thinks that were the Eastern movement to become Western and vice-versa, there would be no difference in the universe then he has destroyed philosophy altogether. He is like a man who thinks that were the right side of the animals to become left, and vice-versa, there would be no difference at all, for one of the two alternatives is there. For as it is possible to say that it is made according to one alternative by an independent Maker, so it is possible to assert that it was all made by chance alone. For we see so many things coming into being by themselves.

It is quite clear to you that all the people see that lower kinds of creation could have been made in a different way from that in which they really are, and as they see this lower degree in many things they think that they must have been made by chance. But in the higher creation they know that it is impossible to have been made in a more perfect and excellent form than that given to it by the Creator. So this opinion, which is one of the opinions of the Mutakallimun is both against the Law and philosophy. What we say is that the opinion of possibility in creation is closer to a complete denial of God, than leading us nearer to Him. At the same time it falsifies philosophy. For if we do not understand that there is a mean between the beginnings and ends of the Creation, upon which is based the ends of things, then there can neither be any order nor any method in it. And if they be wanting then there can be no proof of the existence of an intelligent and knowing Maker; for taking them together with cause and effect we are led to the fact that they must have been created by wisdom and knowledge.

But, on the other hand, the existence of either of two possibilities shows that they may have been performed by a not-knowing Maker and by chance alone. Just as a stone falling on the earth may fall in any place, on any side, and in any form. It will show the want of the existence either of a

creator at all or at least of a wise and knowing Creator. The thing which has compelled the Mutakallimun of the Asharites to adopt this opinion is a denial of the action of those natural forces which God has put in all things, as He has endowed them with life, power and so forth. They avoided the opinion that there was any other creator but God, and God forbid that there be any other, for he is the only creator of the causes and they are made effective by His command only. We will talk of this in detail when discoursing on Fate and Predestination. They were also afraid that by admitting the natural causes they might be accused of saying that the universe came into being by chance only. They would have known that a denial of it means a denial of a great part of the arguments, which can be advanced for a proof of the existence of God. One who denies any part of God's creation denies His work, which falls very near to a denial of a part of His attributes.

On the whole as their opinion is based upon hasty conclusions, which come to the mind of a man by superficial thought and as apparently it appears that the word "intention" can be applied to one who has power to do bad or otherwise, they saw that if they did not admit that all the creation is possible, they would not be able to say that it came into existence by the action of an intending creator. So they say that all the creation is possible so that they may prove that the creator is an intelligent one. They never thought of the order which is necessary in things made, and with that their coming from an intelligent creator. These people have also ignored the blame they will have to bear in thus denying wisdom to the creator; or maintaining that chance should be found governing creation. They know, as we have said, that it is necessary, on account of the order existent in nature, that it must have been brought into being by some knowing creator, otherwise the order found in it would be by chance. When they were compelled to deny the natural forces they had to deny with them a large number of those forces which God has made subservient to His command for the creation and preservation of things. For God has created some things from causes which He has produced from outside, these are the heavenly bodies; there are other things which He has made by causes placed in the things themselves, that is; the soul, and other natural forces, by which he preserves those things. So how wicked is the man who destroys philosophy, and "invented a lie about God" [Qur'an 3.88].

This is only a part of the change which has taken place in the Law, in this and other respects, which we have already mentioned, and will mention hereafter. From all this it must have become clear to you that the method which God had adopted for teaching His creatures that the universe is made and created by Him is the method of kindness and wisdom, towards all His creatures and especially towards man. It is a method which bears the same relation to our intellect, as the sun bears to our senses. The method which it has adopted towards the common people about this problem is that of illustration from things observed. But as there was nothing which could be given as an illustration, and as the common people cannot understand a thing, an illustration of which they cannot see, God tells us that the universe was created in a certain time out of a certain thing, which He made. He tells us his condition before the creation of the universe, "His throne was above the waters" [Qur'an 11.9]. He also says, "Verily your Lord is God who created the heavens and the earth in six days" [Qur'an 7.52], and "Then He set His mind to the creation of the heavens, and it was smoke" [Qur'an 12.10]. In addition to these there are other verses of the Book, pertaining to this subject. So it is incumbent that nothing out of them should be interpreted for the common people, and nothing should be presented to them in explaining it but this illustration. For one who changes it, makes the wisdom of the Law useless. If it be said that the

Law teaches about the universe that it is created, and made out of nothing and in no time, then it is a thing which even the learned cannot understand, not to speak of the common people. So we should not deviate in this matter of the Law. . . .