Philoponus’ Dispute Against the Eternity of the World and Its Influence on the Byzantine Philosophy

Maria Varlamova
Saint Petersburg State University of Aerospace Instrumentation,
The Sociological Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia
boat.mary@gmail.com

Abstract

The article deals with the philosophical and theological context of the dispute against the eternity of the world and studies how Philoponus’ arguments against the eternity of the world were seen in Byzantine philosophy and theology. Special attention is paid to Philoponus’ influence on Byzantine philosophy in such aspects as the concept of matter, the doctrine of the logoi and the relation of the finite to the infinite. In order to demonstrate the influence of Philoponus’ arguments against the eternity of the world the article compares his doctrine with the doctrines of John Damascene and Maximus the Confessor.

Keywords

Philoponus – Maxim the Confessor – John Damascene – creation – infinity – finite being – logos – matter

1 Introduction

Sixth century CE is an epoch, which divides the periods of Late Antiquity and that of Byzantium, an era of the decline of Neoplatonism and dispersal of philosophical schools, a period in which Christian theological discourse occupied the central place in the domain of knowledge. For the newly-arisen Christian worldview knowledge which existed within the confines of the Ancient Greek
philosophy was the only system of knowledge it could deal with, a system it could refer to, and on the basis of which it could ground its own conceptual framework. When Christian philosophy uses scientific terminology of the Antiquity in its own perspective, it transforms the meanings of terms as well as the entire landscape of knowledge. Philoponus’ philosophy was a spectacular example of looking at the Antiquity from the perspective informed by Christian dogmas. In the middle of his life Philoponus published a number of polemical works, in which he revised the fundamental principles of the Peripatetic and Neoplatonic philosophy – first of all, the notion of eternity of the world, notably the treatises On the Eternity of the World against Proclus, On the Eternity of the World against Aristotle (extant in a paraphrase) and an almost non-extant treatise On the Contingency of the World. The principal aim of these works is to prove the Christian dogma of creation ex nihilo by means of Ancient Greek philosophy. Philoponus constructed his arguments by developing new definitions and conceptual linkages which were to influence later history of philosophy.

2 Arguments Against the Eternity of the World in Treatises by Philoponus’ Predecessors

The discussion about the eternity of the world and the possibility of proving either the eternity or the finitude thereof by means of philosophy existed well before Philoponus. Thus, Neoplatonists (Syrianus, Plotinus, Ammonius, Proclus) and Peripatetics (Theophrastus, Xenarchus, Themistius, Alexander of Aphrodisias) discussed nature, matter and celestial motion in connection with the eternity of the world and Aristotle’s argument on infinite power, while, for instance, Philo of Alexandria and Galen believed that the eternity of the world could not be proved by philosophical means.1 This discussion can be divided into philosophical debates about the eternity of the world along with the related debates on celestial matter and nature2 and early Christian polemics.

---

1 See B. Byden, “A case for creationism: Christian cosmology in the 5th and 6th centuries”, in: The many faces of Byzantine philosophy, ed. K. Ierodiakonou, B. Byden, Vol. 1, Athens, 2012, pp. 79-109, here 80.

2 See С.В. Месяц, “Дискуссии об эфире в античности”, в: Космос и душа. Учения о вселенной и человеке в античности и в средние века, изд. П. Гайденко, В. Петров, Москва, 2005, сс. 63-113. [S. Mesyats, “Antient discussions on aether”, in: Cosmos and Soul. Teachings on the univerce and man in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, ed. P. Gaidenko, V. Petrov, Moscow, 2005, pp. 63-113].
against the notion of the eternity of the world which were prevalent in the philosophy of the Antiquity.

The Christian teaching on creation and against the concept of eternity of the world was defended by Procopius of Gaza in his commentaries on the Book of Genesis, Aeneas of Gaza in his dialogue *Theophrastus* and Zacharias of Mytilene in his dialogue *Ammonius*, which probably reproduced and responded to the arguments advanced by Ammonius Hermiae, Philopon's teacher. On the whole, the authors of these treatises criticized the idea of co-eternity of the world to God, which was characteristic of the Neoplatonic philosophy. Neoplatonists, as represented by Zacharias, believed that if God is Good, He cannot create a world inferior in goodness, but He creates the best world possible. Furthermore, if God is Good, He cannot destroy the world, since destructing the best world would contradict God's goodness. Both Aeneas and Zacharias proved that the world could not be co-eternal to God: if God is the first cause of the world, then the World is inferior to God in perfection and dignity, therefore it cannot share eternity with God. In addition, if parts of the world are subject to destruction, it should also be destroyable as a whole and if, being a limited body, it has finite power, then it cannot be eternal by nature; what is subject to destruction by nature must also have a beginning.

Zacharias' treatise *Ammonius* was published in Alexandria, when young Philoponus studied under Ammonius and most probably it had some influence on the former. Philoponus in his *On the Eternity of the World against Proclus* repeats Zacharias' arguments and after Zacharias he formulates an argument of co-eternity of the world to God, while ascribing this argument to Proclus. However, Philoponus' own position is more complex than Zacharias' arguments. In his polemical treatises he not only employs the argument of infinite power and correlation of God and the world in terms of perfection, but also discusses a wider range of issues such as those on infinity in regard to God and the world, time and motion, matter, nature, the Heavens and aether.

---

3 Zaccarias, *Ammonius*, 754-58; 778-89; 1028-74, according: Zaccaria Scolastico: *Ammonio*, trans. Maria Minniti, Naples, 1973.

4 Ibid., pp. 203-7.

5 Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 245d3-4; Aristotle, *De Caelo*, 1.12.

6 See B. Byden, "A case for creationism …", p. 104.

7 Cf. Philoponus. *De aeternitate mundi contra Proclum*, 2,1-4,20; 119,15-120,15.
Philoponus’ Influence on Byzantine Philosophy

Works by Philoponus were considered of high importance in late Greek and early Christian philosophy, and his polemics against the doctrine of the eternity of the world marked the beginning of discussions on this matter in Islamic, Jewish, Byzantine and Latin medieval science. However, despite the fact that Philoponus’ works were so fundamental, his treatises lost their demand in late Byzantine thought. There are two principal reasons for that. First, the theological views of Philoponus were anathematized after his death at the Council of Constantinople in 680-681. This is why Christian philosophers did not reference him, even if they did use his works. Secondly, even though Philoponus was faithful to Christian dogmas, he remained part and parcel of the “old” worldview – that of the Antiquity and not of Christian tradition. His theological works were not accepted in the orthodox tradition, because he was condemned as a heretic while his philosophical works remained too speculative for Byzantine philosophy which was inseparable from theology. Philoponus-philosopher spoke the language of Ancient Greek philosophy and constructed complex arguments regarding issues of physics and cosmology, but these arguments were of no interest to Byzantine theologians who were more concerned with interpreting the Bible and Church Fathers. There is another reason why Philoponus’ works lost their relevance: Christian thought, having firmly established itself on the lands of the Byzantine Empire, no longer had any desire to argue with pagans. As early as seventh century the tradition of the Antiquity ceased to have a place of its own in the landscape of knowledge, and hence there was no longer any need to polemicize on issues which relevant only to that tradition. Outside the context of polemics with pagans the dogma of creation of the world was perceived not as a proposition that requires proof and arguments, but rather as truth, which demands interpretation, while itself remaining incontestable – therefore, any debate with the Ancient Greek cosmology was no longer relevant.

Nevertheless, even though Byzantine philosophers did not refer to Philoponus, they did know him and employed his arguments in their works. According to Byden, Philoponus’ arguments for the eternity of the world could have been received in middle Byzantine philosophy through the Arabs. Thus, Simeon

---

8 See: R. Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum*, London, 1983, p. 202; R. Sorabji, “John Philoponus”, in: *Philoponus and the Rejection of Aristotelian science*, ed. R. Sorabji, 2nd edition, London, 2010, pp. 41-81, here 61-62; W. Donahue, *The dissolution of the Celestial Spheres*, NY, 1981, pp. 188-9; C. Schmitt, “Philoponus in the Sixteenth Century”, in: *Philoponus and the Rejection of Aristotelian science*, ed. R. Sorabji, 2nd edition, London, 2010, pp. 251-268, here 258-265; F. Zimmerman, “Philoponus’ impetus theory in the arabic tradition”, in: *Philoponus and the Rejection of Aristotelian science*, ed. R. Sorabji, 2nd edition, London, 2010, pp. 161-169.

9 B. Byden, “A case for creationism ...”, p. 82.
Seth from Antioch, a Byzantine philosopher of the second half of the eleventh century, who is known for his translations from Arabic, in his *Conspectus rerum naturalium* reproduces arguments against the eternity of the world which both in number and in content correspond to Philoponus’ arguments. He states that since the world is a body, and any finite body has a finite power, the world by nature should have a beginning and an end. These same arguments of John the Grammariam appear in works by John Italus, Simeon’s younger contemporary. In his *Quaestiones quodlibetales* Italus reproduces the argument on infinite power, referring to the VIII book of Aristotle’s *Physics*. Another contemporary of Simeon, Michael Psellus in his commentary to Aristotle’s *Physics* employs a commentary by Philoponus. Although Psellus did not mention Philoponus, scholars clearly detect the influence of the latter on Psellus’ interpretation of the ideas of matter, nature and soul as cause of movement.

An argument for the eternity of the world resembling that of Philoponus appears in Nicephorus Blemmydes who uses it in his *Epitome physica* in order to debate with those who believe in the eternity of the world. Nicephorus refers to it as an argument of the Peripatetic school, but, as noted by contemporary scholars, he borrowed these arguments from Philoponus’ *Against Proclus*. Various overlaps in themes and arguments from Philoponus can also be found in texts by Gemistos Plethon and Gennadius Scholarius, with Scholarius following Philoponus in regards to the definition and structure of human soul, while Plethon followed Philoponus in his criticism of the Aristotelian view of the world. One can draw a parallel between Philoponus’ theory of *logoi* and Plethon’s notion of God as Creator of the intelligible world, the role of cognizable substances in creating the material cosmos and God as the efficient cause of creation. Most probably Plethon borrowed from Philoponus the idea of matter as a created substrate limited by its own *logos* as well as the idea of the world created outside of time. Besides, Plethon makes reference to Philoponus as the one who proved that the heavens consist of fire, not of the fifth element.

---

10 John Italus, “Quaestiones quodlibetales”, 71. In: *Ioannes Italos, Quaestiones quodlibetales*, ed. P. Joannou, Etta, 1956, p. 71.
11 L. Benakis, “Studien zu den Aristoteles-Kommentaren des Michael Psellus,” *Archiv fuer Geschichte der Philosophie*, 43-3 (1961), pp. 215-238, here 232.
12 See L. Benakis, “Studien zu den Aristoteles-Kommentaren des Michael Psellus. Zweiter Teil,” *Archiv fuer Geschichte der Philosophie*, 44-1 (1962), pp. 33-61, here 38-42. Cf. L. Benakis, “Studien zu den Aristoteles-Kommentaren des Michael Psellus...”, p. 225.
13 *PG* 142, coll. 1224B-1228D.
14 B. Bydén, *Theodore Metochites’ Stoicheiosis astronomike and the Study of Natural Philosophy and Mathematics in Early Palaiologan Byzantium*, Göteborg, 2003, pp. 182-84.
Although in some cases one can speak of direct influence of Philoponus’ works, his significance for Byzantine philosophy is based not so much on his authoritativeness in this tradition, but rather on the fact that in adjusting the Ancient Greek philosophical discourse to the needs of Christianity, he redefined a number of fundamental philosophical concepts from the perspective of Christian science. Defining concepts, ways of posing questions and sometimes the very presence of a question in a discussion – all this constitutes his scope of influence. In order to demonstrate this, we will compare Philoponus’ doctrine with that of philosophers, who were under his influence unmediated by the Arab tradition, notably the doctrines of John Damascene and Maximus the Confessor.

Philoponus’ presumable influence should be looked at within a broader perspective which allows to assess the scope of discursive changes elicited by his thought. The influence of an author and his ideas should be evaluated not only based on the number of citations and references of a given author in later sources (which in itself is admittedly an incontestable criterion of author’s significance), but also by the way his ideas transform later discourse, change the meaning of terms and the way they link to each other or the context in which these terms interconnect. It seems that Philoponus’ discussion of the eternity of the world gave way to significant changes in the epistemological field that were established and reproduced as something unquestionable and as something which itself defines the limits of discourse. In order to prove this thesis we will present major points where Philoponus’ connection or influence on the Byzantine tradition can be seen. Furthermore, the article will talk about the doctrine of logoi, that is of the creation of the cognizable and material things, about the concept of matter and the relation between the things created and the Divine in the debate on creation.

3.1 Matter, the Heaven, Elements

The notion of prime matter in philosophy of the Antiquity is one of the key elements used to prove the eternity of the world. The concept of matter was formulated by defining the first substrate which constitutes the limit of coming into existence and passing away. For the Neoplatonists with whom Philoponus polemicized, creation was understood as a union of forms with matter, while matter itself or prime matter was conceived as a formless principle opposite to the creating principle and at the same time as one of the principles of being of sensible things. Aristotle, from whom both Peripatetics and Platonists drew on this issue, demonstrated that matter does not have a beginning since

15 Cf. M. Wolff, *Fallgesetz und Massebegriff. Zwei wissenschaftshistorische Untersuchungen zum Ursprung der klassischen Mechanik*, Berlin, 1971, p. 135.
it is in itself a principle, and not a composite thing. Since prime matter out of which all things come into being is the cause “out of something”, it cannot itself be that which came into existence, but instead is understood as the principle of coming into existence deprived of its own quiddity.

Philoponus redefined the notion of the first substrate in order to prove that matter is not a certain principle deprived of determination, but “something”, the first simple thing, and therefore, like any other thing it can be an object of creation. In the course of his argument Philoponus defines prime matter as an unqualified body or as an undetermined volume which does not change by itself but constitutes the frame of all corporeal changes. He defined the essence of corporality through three-dimensionality. To be a body is to have, first of all, a three-dimensional magnitude; the latter, stripped of any determining qualities, is the first substrate of all things. Matter is understood as a substrate of coming into existence which is not something indeterminate, but has its own logos. Thus, matter becomes the simplest of all existing things which can be created out of nothing (ex nihilo).

The argument about the world being created leads Philoponus not only to the necessity of changing the concept of prime matter but also to rethink the material structure of cosmos: in order to prove that the first heaven can come into existence and pass away he excludes the fifth element (aether). Aristotle defined aether as the fifth element of which the heavens consist. Unlike the other four elements it does not come into existence and pass away, thereby being one of the causes of the principled indestructibility of the heavens. Philoponus agrees with Aristotle that the first heaven is not subject to change and therefore is the most divine of all the material things. However, he believes that heavens should be thought of as generated and perishable. Besides discussing the features of heavenly motion Philoponus proves that celestial mat-
ter does not differ from that of other things, which permits him to deny the existence of aether.26

In Philoponus’ view, instead of consisting of one element, all things including the heaven are composed of their mixture, one of the elements being able to predominate in this compound.27 In the case of the heavens it is fire and its qualities that predominate in the compound, therefore one can say that the heavens are composed of fire. By excluding aether as a special kind of matter Philoponus reduces the heavens to other finite things; he shows that even though the heavens are the first of things, they are indestructible and do not change with time, in itself it possesses the same matter and the same finite nature as other things do.28 Thus, the heavens are not indestructible by nature, but by God’s will, while by nature they are finite.29

Philoponus’ notion of matter and the heavens was adopted by the Byzantine tradition. A definition of matter close to Philoponus’ and understanding of corporality through three-dimensionality can be found in theological texts without any reference to him and without further discussions, which means that this definition came to be understood as the only possible and a self-evident one. Without any reference to Philoponus the heavens are defined as finite by nature and unchangeable by God’s will. Such is the view of John Damascene who states that the heavens are destructible by nature but are not in fact destroyed by the will of the Creator, who sustains His creation: “All things, then, which are brought into existence are subject to corruption according to the law of their nature, and so even the heavens themselves are corruptible. But by the grace of God they are maintained and preserved”.30 Besides, Damascene believes that aether which composes the heavens can be called fire31 and he defines corporality through tree-dimensionality.32

Maximus the Confessor also after Philoponus understands matter as something created: “If every substance, and all matter, and all forms are from God,

26 Ibid. 35,15-17.
27 Ibid. 87,29-88,2.
28 Cf. C. Wildberg, John Philoponus’ Criticism of Aristotle’s Theory of Aether ..., p. 232.
29 R. Sorabji, “Infinite Power Impressed: Transformation of Aristotle’ Physics and Theology”, in: Aristotle Transformed. The Ancient Commentators and their Influence, ed. R. Sorabji, London, 1990, pp. 181-199, here 188.
30 John Damascene, Exp. Fid. 11, 6 (20), 74-76, trans. by E.W. Watson and L. Pullan in: From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 9, NY, 1899.
31 See Д. Бирюков, “Τό ζητερον: аспекты понимания у Иоанна Филопона, поздних платоников и св. Иоанна Дамаскина”, EINAI: проблемы философии и теологии, № 1, (2012), сс. 325-342, здесь 335. [D. Biriukov, “Τό ζητερον: the aspects of understanding by John Philoponus, the latter Platonists and st. John Damascene,” EINAI: Problems of Philosophy and Theology, Vol. 1 (2012), pp. 325-342, here 335].
32 John Damascene, Exp. Fid. 11, 12 (26), 57-60.
then no one, unless he has been deprived of his ability to think rationally would say that matter is without beginning and uncreated, since he knows that God has created and given form to everything.

In addition, he writes that matter begins from a number and is enveloped by a number: matter is understood as “moved by number from which it has its beginning and by which it is contained, and thus it does not possess a being that by nature is free from relation”, which can be compared to Philoponus’ idea that quantity is the essence of a simple body. In addition, Maximus also identifies ether and fire.

3.2 Correlation of the Divine and Created Things

Matter is only one of the issues that demonstrates the conceptual difference between Christian philosophy and that of the Antiquity. One of Philoponus’ most difficult and important objectives in his debate on the eternity of the world was to present another way God (or eternal principle) and the created cosmos relate to each other. For Neoplatonists the world was an immediate effect of God, while God or the One, even if defined as being in itself, was understood in relation to the world as the principle thereof. The cosmos is created by the One and is unthinkable without the One, but the One, in turn, is unthinkable without the cosmos and cosmic hierarchy, the regeneration and maintenance of which are themselves understood as creation. The One is the principle and the first in the hierarchy of existing things, but it does not exist separately from the cosmic hierarchy. This idea is at the root of arguments about the eternity of the world which can be stated as follows: 1) time exists without beginning, while the world is created in time, 2) the concept of the infinite is applicable equally well both to the eternal principle and to a being, 3) the order of nature is uncreated and eternal.

For his part, Philoponus introduced in terms of Neoplatonic philosophy a completely different way of understanding God and the world, a way based first of all on Christian dogmas. Thus, Philoponus does not perceive the world as an immediate effect of the Divine existence, since, although the world was created by God, the existence of the world is not necessary in itself but is a consequence of the free Divine will. Despite the cosmos being thought of as a hierarchy in which God as the cause of the world is the supreme element, God’s existence in itself does not imply the existence of the world as a set of subsequent elements of this hierarchy. The creation of the world is not a neces-

33 Maximus, Ambig. 1184A, trans. by Nicholas Constans in: Maximos the Confessor, On difficulties in the Church Fathers. The Ambigua, ed. and trans. by N. Constans, vol. 1, London, 2014.
34 Ibid. 1184C-1184D
35 Ibid. 1245B
36 Philoponus, Contr. Proclum, 66.25-29.
sary act and does not define God or make the world eternal. In Philoponus’ view God is totally different from the created world and any attempt to define the Divine essence is based precisely on differentiating God from the world: God is described through atemporality, infinity and unity, as opposed to the temporality, finitude and multiplicity of things created. In Philoponus’ view God is totally different from the created world and any attempt to define the Divine essence is based precisely on differentiating God from the world: God is described through atemporality, infinity and unity, as opposed to the temporality, finitude and multiplicity of things created.37 God and the world are no longer considered to be complementary, the incompatibility of God’s infinity and the finitude of the world defines the way their relationship is viewed.

Since the God’s being is fundamentally different from the being of creatures, it was important for Philoponus to show that the ways of describing the being of creatures are inapplicable to describing the Creator. Therefore, he insists that time, motion and other categories, including that of quantity, are only applied to creatures, and it is on this basis that he constructs his argument in *On the Eternity of the World Against Proclus*, when analyzing issues related to time, motion and infinity.38 In one of his arguments Proclus insists that creation is motion.39 If the world does not exist eternally, but instead was created at some point in time, then God, having created the world, moved and therefore changed himself. This would contradict the understanding of God as an eternal and unchangeable being. Besides, if the world was created at some point in time, one would not be able to indicate the reason as to why God created it at that very moment and not before or after. If, however, God decided to create the world at some moment of time arbitrarily, that is without any reason, this would contradict the idea of God as the source of order.40 In responding to these arguments Philoponus insists that motion can only be applied to finite beings, while God is immovable and all-encompassing.41 He does not have limitations, which would allow one to conceive a transition from one thing to another and thus, the creation is not a movement on the part of God.42 The world exists in God in potentiality just as the capacity to write is present in a grammarian or just as he does not need time to start writing if he already has the skill, God does not need time to create.43 He further points out that it is

37 Ibid. 5,15-9,5; Simplicius, *In Phys.* 1150,16-25.
38 Ibid. 59,15-65,20; 5,15-12,5.
39 Ibid. 56,1-26.
40 Philoponus, *In Phys.* 581,18-31.
41 M. Chase explains a difference between God’s creative activity and motion: M. Chase, “Discussions on the eternity of the World in Late Antiquity,” ΣΧΟΛΗ, 7-1 (2013), pp. 20-68, here 49-50.
42 Philoponus, *Contr. Procum*, 81,5-15.
43 Ibid. 62,5-64,15.
only created beings that exist in time, but not the Creator himself.  

First of all, motion is not something applicable to the Creator, whereas time is proper to things capable of moving. Secondly, the Creator is eternal but his eternity should be understood not as an infinite sequence of moments in time following each other but as a unity and integrality of the eternal age without time and motion. For God there is no “before” or “after” and his eternity cannot be conceived through a limited succession, therefore the question as to why the world was not created before or after is meaningless.

Such a separation of the Divine and created things entails a change in the concept of nature which is now understood as divine work; it also results in positing Divine will not only as the principle of being of things but also the principle of motion of cosmos and all things that move by their very nature. Philoponus puts this conception in terms of the theory of impetus – a force that is impressed into that which is moved by that which moves and acts in a moved being without the latter’s contact with the mover. Initially this theory is formulated in Philoponus’ commentaries to Aristotle’s Physics to explain the projectile movement, yet in the same commentary it is applied by Philoponus in order to explain the motion of celestial bodies, while in On the Creation of the World impetus is already used to explain the motion of the entire cosmos. Philoponus writes that when God creates, He impresses force onto the world, this force being both the cause of motion of celestial bodies and that of elements moving to their natural places and also of the inanimate bodies moving by their own souls.

Consequently, God proves to be not only the principle of being, but also the cause of motion of the world, both final and efficient; therefore, the creator is the source of all movement in the world. The idea of God as efficient cause can be compared with that of prime mover in Aristotle’s Physics. Aristotle understands prime mover as the immediate cause of celestial motion and a mediate cause of sublunary beings. Nature is considered by Aristotle as a separate cause of motion related more to the matter and form of a body than to the efficient cause. In Philoponus’ view, nature is also an inner source of movement of all beings but natural causality is associated with the act of creation. Nature is

---

44 Ibid. 35,5-10.
45 Philoponus. In Phys. 641,7-642,25.
46 Ibid. 384,10-385,11.
47 Philoponus, Opif. Mundi, 28,20-29,9 See also C. Scholten, Antike Naturphilosophie und christliche Kosmologie in der Schrift “De opificio mundi” des Johannes Philoponos”, Berlin, 1996, p. 200.
48 Concerning nature as a beginning of motion in Philoponus, cf. H. Lang, The order of Nature in Aristotle’s Physics: Place and The Elements, Cambridge, 1998, pp. 106-111.
understood as the created order of beings reflecting the order of divine logoi.49 Within natural order there is motion of beings whose initial cause is divine power. Thus Philoponus rethinks the Aristotelian fundamental distinction between the natural and artificial that is based on the fact that the cause of movement is in the thing itself (in natural things) or elsewhere (in artificial things): nature becomes an object of divine art and, as the created order, the basis for the finitude of all being.

The Byzantine tradition borrowed from Philoponus’ idea about the distinction between the Divine and created being, expressed in statements about God’s immovability and existence outside of time and space as well as in discussions about Divine infinity. Thus, Damascene writes that the Divine is incorporeal50 and exists outside of time: “For age is to things eternal just what time is to things temporal”.51 He believes that since the world originated from nothing, it has a different nature from God’s: “All things are far apart from God, not in place but in nature”.52 Every creature (even angels) is limited, “for that alone is naturally and strictly unlimited which is uncreated. For every created thing is limited by God Who created it”.53 Finally, any created thing possesses matter and, as compared to God, “we find it to be dense and material. For in reality only the Deity is immaterial and incorporeal”.54 This is why created things are changeable and movable, while the uncreated is changeless and immovable.55 Besides, Damascene writes on divine infinity which cannot be measured but exceeds any measure and number.56

Maximus the Confessor writes about the indeterminability of God’s being, whereas any qualification of being is, according to him, proper only to created things:

For the Divine is beyond closure in language or thought, which is why when we say that the Divine “exists,” we do not predicate of it the category of being, for though being is derived from God, God Himself is not “being” as such. For God is beyond being, whether one speaks or thinks in terms of the “how” of a being, or of “being” in a simple, unqualified sense. And if beings have existence, not simply, but in a way qualified by a “how,”

49 See C. Scholten, Antike Naturphilosophie und christliche Kosmologie ..., pp. 197-202.
50 John Damascene, Exp. Fid. I, 4 (4), 21.
51 Ibid. II, 1 (15), 11-13.
52 Ibid. I, 13 (13), 58.
53 Ibid. II, 3 (17), 36-38.
54 Ibid. II, 3 (17), 12-14; cf.: 26. 3-5.
55 Ibid. II, 3 (17), 16-17.
56 See Д. Бируков, “Τό ἄπειρον: аспекты понимания у Иоанна Филопона ...”, сс. 334-335.
then it has to be granted that, just as they exist subject to a “where,” on account of the position and definiteness of their natural principles, so they are completely subject to a “when” on account of their having a beginning.\(^{57}\)

In separating God’s being from that of created things, Maximus makes an even bolder statement saying that God is not a being but the principle of being, while the world is a being that can be described in categories. He considers space and time as characteristics of being, whereas God is above being and exceeds any determination.

Like Philoponus, Byzantine philosophers believed that God is the source both of being and of motion of the whole universe. They understood nature as divine order and expression of the finitude of beings. Thus, Damascene writes: “For the first mover is motionless, and that is the Deity. And must not that which is moved be circumscribed in space? The Deity, then, alone is motionless, moving the universe by immobility.”\(^{58}\)

Maximus extends this reasoning and believes that motion is a characteristic of all created beings – both intelligible and sensible, and is a necessary property of all that has being that is inherent in their nature:

To be sure, the motion of intelligible beings is an intelligible motion, whereas that of sensible beings is a sense-perceptible motion. According to those who have examined these matters carefully, no being in principle is devoid of motion (including beings that are inanimate and merely objects of sense perception).\(^{59}\)

Furthermore, like Philoponus Maximus views nature as both an order of finite beings and an ontological limitation, since nothing in nature can be eternal but all things that have being are by nature finite. There is nothing motionless by its very nature either, while motion has a cause and an end, hence all that exists is finite by nature: “No beings are without a beginning, since none of them is unmoved. Everything that in any way exists is in motion, except the sole, unmoved Cause that transcends all things.”\(^{60}\) He associates being in motion with limitation and finitude and contrasts it with the immovable God as the beginning of being and motion:

\(^{57}\) Maximus, *Ambig.* 1180D-1181A

\(^{58}\) John Damascene, *Exp. Fid.* 1, 4 (4), 18–21.

\(^{59}\) Maximus, *Ambig.* 1072A-1072B

\(^{60}\) Ibid. 1177A
A person knows that whatever is moved had a beginning of its motion, so too does he also understand that whatever has come to be began coming into being, receiving both its being and being moved from that which alone is uncreated and unmoved. Thus, that which owes its existence to an act of coming into being cannot in any way be without a beginning.\(^{61}\)

3.3 The Theory of Logoi

Besides the distinction between the Divine and created realities it is essential for Philoponus to address the issue of the plan of creation or that of models that precede the creation of the world. Models for creation can be found in Philoponus’ theory of *logoi*. Philoponus believed that *logoi*, which eternally exist in the divine intelligence were models for creation;\(^{62}\) God’s thoughts or *logoi* as models for creation were discussed after Philoponus by Byzantine philosophers. Both Philoponus’ philosophy and Byzantine philosophy used the Neoplatonic idea of cosmos as hierarchy of different levels of being with a clear distinction between the intelligible or ideal and the sensible or material beings. However, because of the division into created and uncreated realities this hierarchy becomes more complex. Uncreated divine *logoi* that exist in the Divine mind can be considered as separate entities that have their own being and at the same time as the principle of being of all created things. For their part, created things are finite and movable, and while it is possible to distinguish material and immaterial entities within the created world (for example, soul and body); however, both are defined as movable and finite.

Neoplatonists understood forms or *logoi* as eternal principles of finite things, and based on the eternity of forms they proved the eternity of the material world. If a form is that of a thing, then together with the being of a form there must exist a thing\(^{63}\) – this argument implies that forms exist only in relation to matter. Philoponus demonstrated that forms or *logoi* of things can exist not only in things or together with matter but also without any relation to things, that is without matter.\(^{64}\) *Logos* as the essence of a thing has a being that is independent from the being of this thing; the essence of ideas lies not in being models for material beings but instead in their own nature. If the being of *logoi* does not depend on their relation to the world, then they exist in the mind of God even before the creation of the world, while their eternal existence does not prove that the world exists eternally. Hereby Philoponus sepa-

\(^{61}\) Ibid. 1180A

\(^{62}\) Philoponus, *Contr. Proclum*. 37,1-10; 41.8-22; 78.8-24.

\(^{63}\) Ibid. 25,8-12.

\(^{64}\) Ibid. 35,5-20.
rates the created and Divine realities by separating things and *logoi* contained in God’s mind. While for Neoplatonists ideas are models and are discussed in the context of the creation of the world (creation itself being understood as incessant realization of models in matter), Philoponus, in turn, does not believe that *logoi* should be reduced to models. He says that the being of ideas or *logoi* does not depend on whether a thing the model of which they could be actually has being. Philoponus proves that *logoi* or essences of things possess being even before creation, and it is only at the time of creation that they become models for material things.

This way of separating Divine *logoi* had an influence on further theological discussions which reinstated the idea of God’s thoughts according to which the world is created or that of the *logoi* of things which are contained in the Divine mind and serve as models for creation. Damascene writes that God creates with his thought: “and it is by thought that He creates, and thought is the basis of the work, the Word filling it and the Spirit perfecting it”. In turn, Maximus elaborates an extensive doctrine of *logoi*, the sources of which are to be sought in Philoponus’ thought.

Notably, Maximus the Confessor in *The Ambigua to John* states that creation is preceded by *logoi* which are God’s providence for the world:

> From all eternity, He contained within Himself the preexisting *logoi* of created beings. When, in His goodwill, He formed out of nothing the substance of the visible and invisible worlds, He did so on the basis of these *logoi*. By His *word* (*logos*) and His *wisdom* He *created* and continues to create *all things* – universals as well as particulars – at the appropriate time.

These *logoi* are thought by the Divine mind and therefore by their nature are not related to things, they do not move and are not created together with the world; they will not be destroyed together with the world but exist eternally in the Divine mind. They are models for creation, but being a model is not part of their essence, since they exist before things and are not defined by their

---

65 Ibid. 36, 22-26.
66 John Damascene, *Exp. Fid.* II, 2 (16). 6-8.
67 Maximus, *Ambig.* 1069-1101.
68 See G. Беневич, *О философско-богословском синтезе Иоанна Филопона*, Научный богословский портал Богослов.Ru <http://www.bogoslov.ru/text/71675.html>. [G. Беневич, *The philosophic-theological synthesis of John Philoponus* <http://www.bogoslov.ru/text/71675.html>].
69 Maximus, *Ambig.* 1080А.
relation to them. Any created being has a *logos* that preexists in God, and there are not only *logoi* of a created thing, but also those of its attributes and relations between things. However, although the world is completely determined by divine *logoi* in which the potential being of a creature is included, *logoi* themselves cannot be compared to created things:

For God is eternally an active creator, but creatures exist first in potential, and only later in actuality; since it is not possible for the infinite and the finite to exist simultaneously on the same level of being. Indeed no argument will ever be able to demonstrate the simultaneous interdependence of being and what transcends being, or of the measureless and what is subject to measurement, or that the absolute can be ranked with the relative, or that something of which no specific category can positively be predicated can be placed in the same class as what is constituted by all the categories. For in their substance and formation all created things are positively defined by their own *logoi*, and by the *logoi* that exist around them and which constitute their defining limits.70

In his doctrine Maximus postulates the separate being of *logoi* as indisputable. He proves that since the *logos* of each thing exists in God’s mind before the creation of the world, this thing itself has in it a particle of the Divine71 which at the same time is a momentum for moving towards God. The Divine exists motionless, while the created moves, God being both the efficient cause and the end of this motion.72 Consequently, *logos* is not only the form of a thing in an Aristotelian sense, but also the end for the sake of which it is set in motion, the end of its motion. Thus, it is not as if *logos* existed in virtue of its relation to a thing, but the thing *is* due to its relation to the Creator. The aspiration of a created thing towards its *logos* determines human aspiration to knowledge. Since the search for truth or knowledge reflects the aspiration of intelligence to Divine *logoi*, it can be considered as a practice leading to God: “He who does not determine the nature of visible things only by way of senses, but wisely seeks the meaning (*logon*) in any created thing with intelligence, finds God.”73

---

70 Ibid. 1081A-1081B
71 Ibid. 1080С
72 About the dynamic soteriological dimension of Maximus’ theory of *logoi* by contrast with Philoponus see: G. Benevich, “John Philoponus and Maximus the Confessor at the Crossroads of philosophical and theological Thought in late Antiquity,” *Scrinium* 7-8 (2011-2012), pp. 102-130, here 123.
73 Maximus, *Quaest. Ad Thalassium*, XXXII.
4 Conclusion

A lot of effort had been applied within Christian philosophy to build a new science out of bricks, which were left by philosophy of the Antiquity. Philoponus’ works constitute an important part of this effort. In using the Ancient Greek physics in his debate about the eternity of the world Philoponus raises a number of important issues which were not addressed before him. He demonstrates the created character of matter and the finitude of Heavens, defines nature as an order created and sustained by God. Furthermore, by proving that God is infinite and eternal while created things are finite and exist in time, Philoponus coins concepts, which permit to speak about the fundamental difference between God and creation: he defines the way one can understand God’s infinity in relation to creatures and speak about the finitude in time of all created things. Philoponus’ arguments or rather concepts defined by way of argumentation were later adopted one way or another, yet not so much as questions to be discussed but rather as something taken for granted. On the one hand, the fact that physics and cosmology go beyond the themes discussed later, made Philoponus a philosopher who was not referred to; on the other hand, the very possibility of taking these issues for granted were not only the result of a shift in philosophical interests, but also due to the fact that these issues had been already discussed in detail within the polemics on the eternity of the world.