



Aristotle's Theory of Causes and the Holy Trinity New Evidence About the Chronology and Religion of Nicolaus "of Damascus"

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Article abstract

The identity and chronology of Nicolaus Peripatheticus, the author of a summary of Aristotle's philosophy, were recently discussed in a paper by Silvia Fazzo published in the *Revue des Études Grecques*. The usual dating, based upon the identification of Nicolaus with the famous historian Nicolaus Damascenus, places Nicolaus in the 1st century BC, but Fazzo argues that it is likely that he lived in the period ranging from the 3rd to the 5th centuries AD, and more likely, during the age of the Roman Emperor Julian (361-363 AD). This hypothesis is supported by a new fragment in Hebrew translation, discovered by Mauro Zonta, where Nicolaus gives an explanation of the Christian doctrine of God's Trinity in terms of Aristotle's doctrine of causes : God is one, being a single substance, but He is also three, insofar as He is the efficient, formal, and final causes of the world. As far as it is possible for such a short fragment, the authors contend that it is plausible to date it from the age of Julian.

ARISTOTLE'S THEORY OF CAUSES AND THE HOLY TRINITY

NEW EVIDENCE ABOUT THE CHRONOLOGY AND RELIGION OF NICOLAUS "OF DAMASCUS"

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RÉSUMÉ : L'identité et la datation de Nicolas le Péripatéticien, l'auteur d'un sommaire de la philosophie d'Aristote, ont fait l'objet d'un article récent de Silvia Fazzo paru dans la Revue des Études Grecques. Contre la datation courante, fondée sur l'identification de Nicolas à l'historien de grand renom Nicolas Damascène (1^{er} siècle av. J.-C.), Fazzo a montré que Nicolas avait probablement vécu au cours de la période couvrant les III^e au V^e siècles ap. J.-C., et plus probablement à l'époque de l'empereur Julien l'Apostat (361-363). Cette hypothèse trouve un appui dans un nouveau fragment en traduction hébraïque découvert par Mauro Zonta, dans lequel Nicolas cherche à expliquer la Trinité de Dieu au moyen de la doctrine aristotélicienne des causes : Dieu est un, en tant que sa substance est une, mais Dieu est également trois, puisqu'il est à la fois causes motrice, formelle et finale du monde. Dans la mesure, évidemment réduite, où un fragment si court est susceptible de datation, l'époque de Julien paraît la plus probable.

ABSTRACT : The identity and chronology of Nicolaus Peripateticus, the author of a summary of Aristotle's philosophy, were recently discussed in a paper by Silvia Fazzo published in the Revue des Études Grecques. The usual dating, based upon the identification of Nicolaus with the famous historian Nicolaus Damascenus, places Nicolaus in the 1st century BC, but Fazzo argues that it is likely that he lived in the period ranging from the 3rd to the 5th centuries AD, and more likely, during the age of the Roman Emperor Julian (361-363 AD). This hypothesis is supported by a new fragment in Hebrew translation, discovered by Mauro Zonta, where Nicolaus gives an explanation of the Christian doctrine of God's Trinity in terms of Aristotle's doctrine of causes : God is one, being a single substance, but He is also three, insofar as He is the efficient, formal, and final causes of the world. As far as it is possible for such a short fragment, the authors contend that it is plausible to date it from the age of Julian.

From 1841 onwards, the Syrian Peripatetic scholar Nicolaus, the author of a comprehensive *Compendium of Aristotle's Philosophy* (Περὶ τῆς Ἀριστοτέλους φιλοσοφίας, *De philosophia Aristotelis*, thereafter : *DPA*), has been identified as the

historian Nicolaus of Damascus (b. 64 BC ca.), a rhetor working at the service of Herod the Great (d. 4 AD).¹ The identification was first suggested by Eduard Meyer, the author of a *Geschichte der Botanik* and editor of a Latin version of Nicolaus' treatise Περὶ φυτῶν. The identity for Nicolaus the Peripatetic was promptly accepted by Gottlieb Friedrich Roeper (the author of a book on Bar Hebraeus), later adopted by Eduard Zeller, and never radically questioned thereafter.

Since no ancient source supports either the identification of the two Nicolaus (i.e. the rhetor and the philosopher) or the 1st century BC/AD as date of composition for the *DPA*, both issues have recently been reconsidered afresh²: based on both external evidence about Nicolaus and the overall methodological character of the *DPA*, a significant shift in chronology has been suggested, from the 1st century (as originally proposed) to the 3rd-5th centuries AD, and possibly as late as the 4th. For, according to the well-known 13th-century Syriac author Gregory Bar Hebraeus (whose works are now an important source for fragments of the *DPA* and the only extant source for Nicolaus' chronology) at the time of Julian the Apostate (361-363 AD) Nicolaus was one of the most prominent authorities in philosophical wisdom. Moreover, according to Bar Hebraeus, this Nicolaus lived not in Damascus, but in the Syrian city of Laodicea.

The evidence for an identification of the two Syriac Nicolaus is thus reduced to a minimum, especially taking into account the words of the Church Father Sophronius of Damascus, who prized his city for having been the native place of no less than *thirteen* Nicolaus, all of whom prided themselves for their philosophical skills.

A new piece of evidence — a fragment recently discovered by Mauro Zonta — comes now to press the identity issue further and to shed new light on Nicolaus. As

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1. We are grateful for comments from our editors, to Carlo Maria Mazzucchi (Università Cattolica, Milano) and to Robert W. Sharples (UCL, London). We would especially like to thank Annie Hewitt (King's College London), who very kindly edited a previous version of the text. Nicolaus the rhetor and the historian is supposed to have been in contact with the Emperor Augustus as well, whose life is related in an extant book under his name. Its edition by Jürgen MALITZ, *Nikolaos von Damaskus. Leben des Kaisers Augustus*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft (coll. "Texte zur Forschung", 80), 2003, includes a general bibliography, especially on Nicolaus as an author of historical works.
 2. See Silvia FAZZO, "Nicolas, l'auteur du *Sommaire de la Philosophie d'Aristote*. Doutes sur son identité, sa datation, son origine", *Revue des Études Grecques*, 121 (2008), p. 99-126. To this it can be added that the newly edited *Concordantia in Nicolaum Damascenum*, ed. by Étienne FAMERIE, Hildesheim, Olms, 2007, includes no single occurrence of the word "Aristotle", and that references to "philosophy" or "philosophers" are very few and seem to be understood in a very general sense (i.e. in the sense of a way of life rather than institutionalized teaching in a school of philosophy) (see however fragment 132 from the Suda in F. Jacoby, *Fragm. gr. Hist.*, IIA s.v.).

will be discussed in what follows, there is reason to believe that he was a Christian³ and was well acquainted with the Christian dogma of the Holy Trinity.⁴

If this is the case, Nicolaus produced a peculiarly Peripatetic version of this dogma : God is one, being a single substance, but He is also three, insofar as He is the efficient cause, formal cause, and final cause of the whole world. The fragment immediately follows a reference to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, and this suggests that it was quoted from Nicolaus' exposition of this book (a work of his which is quoted by a famous scholion in the ms. of Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, gr. 1853, f. 312r, possibly a section of the *DPA* itself). If so, it is likely that its original location in the book was framed within an account of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, *Book Lambda*, ch. 6ss. (although it must be remembered that Nicolaus did not always keep the same order of contents as the one he found in Aristotle's books⁵).

As for Aristotle's own theology, the question whether his God, the Prime Mover, is an efficient or final cause is a very controversial matter, and it is not surprising that Nicolaus wished to harmonize those views as he could find good reasons in favour of both.

3. This may already be suspected because of a fragment by him discussing angels, quoted in a Latin manuscript and regarded as unauthentic (insofar as Christian) by Pierre DUHEM, *Le système du monde. Histoire des doctrines cosmologiques de Platon à Copernic*, vol. III, Paris, Hermann, 1915, p. 245-246. This fragment, found in the ms. of Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, lat. 16089, folio 153v and having the title *Haec sunt extracta de libro Nicholai peripatetici*, includes a passage where the author affirms that Plato "imitates God, who at the beginning has made the greatest and noblest creation, that of the angels and of the intelligences". The Latin fragment had already been published in Barthélemy HAURÉAU, *De la philosophie scolastique*, vol. I, Paris, Pagnerre, 1850, p. 471-472, where the above quoted passage is found as follows : *Plato [...] imitatur namque Deum qui posuit principium a fortiori et nobiliori creatione et angelorum creationem seu intelligentiarum*. Hauréau had already regarded the passage as substantially unauthentic, since he quoted it as taken from a pseudonymous work. Duhem tried to corroborate this hypothesis by pointing out that the fragment ends with the statement : "And this is what Averroes affirms". According to Duhem, this is proof that the author of this fragment lived after Averroes, so that he cannot be identified with the Peripatetic philosopher Nicolaus. However, the mention of Averroes at the end of the fragment does not seem to preclude Nicolaus' authorship of it since such a mention might be seen as an addition by the copyist. According to Ernest Renan, this fragment essentially corresponds to a short digression added by Averroes to his *Long Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics, Book Lambda*. In any case, Averroes surely knew and employed the *DPA* as a source, since he quotes some passages of its section on *Metaphysics* in his own commentary, as shown by Hendrik Joan DROSSAART LULOFS, *Nicolaus Damascenus. On the Philosophy of Aristotle*, Leiden, Brill, 1965, second rev. ed. 1969, p. 76-80.

4. After Polymnia ATHANASSIADI and Michael FREDE, *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, Oxford, Clarendon Press ; New York, Oxford University Press, 1999, one cannot neglect the possibility that monotheism in late antiquity need not be Christian monotheism, and that a Trinitarian doctrine does not need in itself to be a Christian Trinitarian doctrine. One may think in particular of the Chaldean theology whose interpretation by Damascius (*De primis principiis* III. 108-159) is discussed in Polymnia ATHANASSIADI, "The Chaldean Oracles : Theology and Theurgy", in *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, p. 149-184, especially 168-171. Nevertheless, insofar as we can judge from a cursory survey, it does not seem that this kind of source could be crucial in explaining the most peculiar features of Nicolaus' explanation of God's Trinity as opposed both to Aristotle's theory of the first principles and to other better known sources for Christian theology as quoted above. As we are trying to show, what is original in Nicolaus is the attempt to reconcile these two in a unified view.

5. See DROSSAART LULOFS, *Nicolaus Damascenus. On the Philosophy of Aristotle*, T. 7.5-6.

If he was a Christian, the idea that God as Creator is an efficient cause fits quite naturally in his exegesis of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, as the introduction of the fragment indicates, in particular if one compares book 12, chapters 6-7, of this work.⁶

Concerning God as formal cause, this idea is less immediately evident in Aristotle. However in at least one passage of *Lambda*, his Prime Mover is said to be substance without matter, essence only (*Lambda* 1074a35, cf. 1071a36); this will allow Alexander of Aphrodisias (c. 200 AD) to regard it as pure, immaterial form, εἶδος ἄνευ ὕλης (cf. e.g. Alexander's *Quaestiones* I.1, p. 4.7-16,⁷ I.25, p. 39.9s.).⁸

As for the connexion of these different kinds of causes to each other, Aristotle's *Physics* II.7 states that in living beings the efficient cause is identical (at least, i.e., specifically identical) with the formal cause, and moreover that this is identical (both specifically and numerically) with the final cause. Thus the doctrine of the fragment, even if unusual, seems a plausible one for a Peripatetic scholar, and it warrants some historical and philosophical analysis for its peculiar harmonizing character.

Nicolaus' interpretation of Aristotle's Prime Mover seems to have been combined with the fundamental Christian view about the second person of the Trinity. According to this view, the Christ is ὁ λόγος as found already in the first words of St. John's Gospel (λόγος belongs to Aristotle's standard terminology to indicate the formal cause, see *Metaph. passim*, e.g. 983a28).

Can the final cause be understood as representing the Spirit? Certainly the final cause might be identified as the *soul*, in accordance with Aristotle's natural philosophy, and especially with his definition of soul as the final cause or perfection (ἐντελέχεια) of the living being in *De Anima* II. While the Holy Spirit is not identical with Aristotle's soul, the idea of perfection is often connected to it by Church Fathers (e.g. John of Damascus⁹). Moreover, the concept of "final cause" can be regarded as an expression of God's perfection in truth, knowledge, will and love as we will see in some later, namely Mediaeval sources for Christian theology.¹⁰

With this all, it must be noted that Nicolaus' explanation of God's Trinity implies a commitment by God to the world, namely three different ways of relating to it. On one hand, this distinguishes it from a purely theological Trinitarian doctrine, where

6. Concerning creation, Stephen Menn pointed out to us that Nicolaus may have referred to Plato's *Timaeus*, as suggested by the Latin fragment published by Hauréau (see n. 3, and see also the reference to Plato discussed below, n. 30).

7. See notes *ad loc.* in Silvia FAZZO's contribution to this issue.

8. This shows that the unmoved Prime Mover can be and was interpreted as pure form, but that is not yet the same as its being the form *of the world*. This seems to be peculiar to Nicolaus' fragment. However, Themistius says something more like this when he claims that the unmoved Prime Mover is the cause of the unity of the world and of each of the animals in it; for each thing, the goal is being one (see THEMISTIUS, *In Metaph. A*, chapter 10.22, trans. Brague = p. 39, l. 28-32, ed. Landauer; cf. also chapter 10.6, trans. Brague = p. 35, l. 31-36, ed. Landauer). We owe this helpful observation to Robert Sharples.

9. See e.g. JOHN OF DAMASCUS, *De fide orthodoxa*, PG 94, 828D, where it is said that the Spirit is τὸ τέλειον τῆς ὑποστάσεως (with Italian translation by V. Fazzo, GIOVANNI DAMASCENO, *La Fede ortodossa*, Roma, 1998).

10. See below.

the relation among the three Persons is at issue rather than their relation to the world.¹¹ On the other hand, insofar as it can be regarded as an attempt to reduce the extramundane character of Aristotle's theology,¹² it falls in line with the doctrine of Providence which is peculiar to late antiquity's Aristotelianism, from Alexander of Aphrodisias onward (200 AD ca.).

In the introduction of Nicolaus' fragment, Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is mentioned (a reference which is much more likely to originate from Nicolaus himself than to be an independent addition by the Jewish author who quoted the fragment, Avner of Burgos). This shows a further common feature between Nicolaus and Alexander: both were claiming to explain the thought of Aristotle, while putting forward theories which were not really Aristotle's theories, but rather merely compatible with them. This tendency, though a fairly common trend within the Aristotelian tradition, is worth mentioning here because it guarantees for the attribution of the fragment quoted below to a purely Aristotelian scholar, Nicolaus the Peripatetic, the author of the *DPA*. Indeed, Nicolaus the author of the fragment produced a peculiarly Peripatetic version of the Trinitarian dogma.

At the same time, his theory is quite obviously related to the highly controversial question of how the Holy Trinity is to be conceived. This offer a plausible criterion for dating the fragment.

Firstly, it should be pointed out that the first well-known occurrence of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is probably the one found in Tertullian's *Adversus Praxeam*, written in c. 210 AD.¹³ If this is a *terminus post quem*, the passage could not have been written by our Nicolaus before the 3rd century AD.

Second, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity does not became a theologic-philosophical doctrine in the terms of the classical tradition, and especially of theory of causes, before the first half of the 4th century, the era of the first great theological disputations, including the one concerning Arius' heresy and its resolution at the Council of Nicaea (325 AD). This is another likely *terminus post quem* for Nicolaus' application of Aristotle's theory of causes to this controversial point.¹⁴

11. We are especially grateful to Prof. Carlo Maria Mazzucchi for comments on this point.

12. See e.g. Atticus' complaint in fr. 3 (rr. 49-96, p. 48-49 Des Places), according to which the gods of Aristotle have the world in front of them but they do not care about it, so that in Aristotle's opinion there would be no place for providence at all. See also Epict., *Diss.* I 2,2-6. Alexander's theory of providence can be regarded as an answer to such an objection; but nothing similar to Nicolaus' trinitarian doctrine can be found in Alexander's work.

13. See Franz DUNZL, *Kleine Geschichte des trinitarische Dogmas in der Alten Kirche*, Freiburg im Breisgau, 2006 (Italian transl., Brescia, 2007, in part. p. 41-46).

14. An interesting parallel here comes from a treatise falsely ascribed to the Church Father Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 295-373 AD), but probably written in the same period. It holds one of the closest doctrines one can find in late antiquity to Nicolaus' discussing the Trinity dogma in terms of "causes". In the long dialogue *De sancta trinitate* (PG 28, 1129B), pseudo-Athanasius states that "the Father is cause of the Son, while the Son is the cause of the creation (of the world)" (ὁ πατήρ τοῦ υἱοῦ αἰτιός ἐστι, τῆς δὲ κτίσεως ὁ υἱός), and that the Holy Spirit "has as (His) cause God, of which He is the Spirit" (αἴτιον δὲ ἔχει τὸν θεόν, οὗ πνεῦμά ἐστι).

Third, Nicolaus holds that the three causes are one and the same substance (apparently just one, and not three beings identical in substance). If, as already suggested, the three causes are the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, this means that both the Son and the Holy Spirit are one substance with the Father.

A theory dividing God into three different divinities was circulating, and subsequently disclaimed by the Catholic Church in the second half of the 3rd century (260).¹⁵ Around this time, a doctrine of the consubstantiality of the Son was apparently held by Paul of Samosata and condemned by the Antiochene Synod in 268.¹⁶

Then in 325 AD, the Council in Nicaea, dealing chiefly (against Arius) with the Son, the second Person in the Trinity, established that the Son (and the Son only) is ὁμοούσιος, consubstantial with the Father. Only a few decades later, responding to further controversies concerning the status of the Spirit (which some Egyptian Christians regarded as *made* by God), Athanasius of Alexandria said that the Spirit as well is ὁμοούσιος with the Father.¹⁷ This view, though far from uncontroversial, was accepted by the Synod held in Alexandria (362 AD) under Athanasius' leadership.

A similar view was accepted by the First Council in Constantinople (381 AD), in a form inspired by the teaching of Basilus of Caesarea (c. 330-378 AD). There, the doctrine that regarded the Holy Spirit as being a creation of the Father (held by the so-called Pneumatomachians) was decisively rejected as well.

But the idea of ὁμοούσιος (which, notably, referred principally to the Son in relation to the Father) was then understood less as *identity* than as *similarity* in substance: like ὁμοιοούσιος, “of the similar nature”¹⁸ and concerning the Holy Spirit, Basilus rather insisted on its being ὁμότιμος, “worth of the same worship”, with the Father and the Son. This is the doctrine expressed by the Symbolum Nicaenum-Constantinopolitanum, where the Son is *consubstantialem Patri* (ὁμοούσιος τῷ πατρὶ), whereas the Spirit, though being *cum Patre et Filio adorandum et conglorificandum* (in the Greek: σὺν πατρὶ καὶ υἱῷ συμπροσκυνούμενον καὶ συνδοξαζόμενον), is not said to be *consubstantiale*.¹⁹

15. The Pope St. Denis (259-268), in his *Epistula contra Triteistas et Sabellianos*, written in c. 260 AD, condemned the one who divided God's Unity εἰς τρεῖς δυνάμεις τινὰς καὶ μεμερισμένας ὑποστάσεις καὶ θεότητας τρεῖς, “into three ‘powers’ and separate hypostases, and (into) three godnesses”. See Henricus DENZINGER, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, § 48,1.

16. Winrich A. LÖHR, “A Sense of Tradition: the Homoiousian Church Party”, in Michael R. BARNES, Daniel H. WILLIAMS, ed., *Arianism after Arius: Essays on the Development of the Fourth Century Trinitarian Conflicts*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1993, p. 81-100, esp. p. 88.

17. ATHANASIUS, *Ep. ad Serapionem*, 127, PG 26, p. 594C: τὸ πνεῦμα... τοῦ θεοῦ... ἴδιον καὶ ὁμοούσιον ἔστι.

18. It is perhaps worth mentioning that if the word ὁμοούσιος was not exempt from ambiguity, insofar as it could be understood both as *identity* and as *similarity* in substance (in this latter case, like ὁμοιοούσιος), and if this was the way different theological positions were attempted to be merged into one, this tension, which belongs in itself to the history of Christian Trinity doctrine, is not easily solved by reference to a purely Aristotelian concept of substance. For this latter idea relies on a specific, or generic sense of substantial identity (as when Aristotle says: “Man begets a man”) not less than a numerical one (when substance is conceived as individual substance).

19. *Conciliorum oecumenicorum generaliumque decreta*, Turnhout, Brepols (coll. “Corpus Christianorum”, 1), 2006, p. 57, l. 10 s., 27-29.

Now, even if it is difficult to find a neat *terminus ante quem* for Nicolaus' theological position, if we accept that Nicolaus, not being an original theologian himself, is likely to have relied on those assumptions about the Trinity that held most authority by Eastern theologians of his time,²⁰ then the strongest parallel is with the theories of Athanasius and at the Synod in Alexandria of 362. Such an assumption corresponds strikingly with the chronology based on Bar Hebraeus' account, according to which Nicolaus *floruit* in the times of Julian, emperor in 361-363 AD.

More parallels to Nicolaus' theory can be sought and found in theological texts, especially from the 12th c. onward. Some general references may be of interest and will be given below following the actual edition and translation of the relevant fragment from Nicolaus by Mauro Zonta.

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The Spanish Jewish philosopher Avner of Burgos (c. 1270-1345) wrote a number of books about philosophical and theological issues, some of which probably date from after c. 1320, when he converted to Christianity and defended his conversion through an opposition to another Spanish Jewish scholar, Isaac Polgar. Avner of Burgos' reply to Isaac Polgar's criticism is found in his work *Teshuvot la-Meharef* (*Replies to the Critic*, written in Hebrew and preserved in one manuscript only : Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, *Parmense* 2440, folios 8r-66r). While examining the question of the relationships between the Creator (i.e. God) and the things created by Him, Avner attempts to demonstrate that such relationships are "substantial" ones. To support this, he quotes an interpretation of an Aristotelian doctrine, allegedly found in the *Metaphysics*,²¹ which he claims to have taken from Nicolaus (apparently, from books 2 or 3 of his *DPA*, which include an interpretation of the contents of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*).

Alfonso de Valladolid (Avner of Burgos), *Teshuvot la-Meharef*, in ms. Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, *Parmense* 2440, folio 20r, lines 8-16²² :

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20. In the West, and especially in Rome, the situation was somehow different, inclining towards a strong monotheism, as opposed to Pagan cults. The Council of Rome (382 AD), in its declaration *De trinitate et incarnatione*, affirmed that the Holy Spirit has *both* the same *power* and the same *substance* as the Father and the Son (*cum Patre et Filio unius potestatis [est] atque substantiae*). Still, concerning the ὁμοούσιον of the Spirit, this position was closer to Athanasius' than to Basilus' for whom the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are only one godness (*Patris, Filii et Spiritus Sancti unam divinitatem... [esse]*) in substance, although they are three distinct persons (*tres personas... veras Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti*). See Henricus DENZINGER, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, § 59, 78-79 and 82.
21. As a matter of fact, a similar doctrine, according to which the three causes (efficient, formal, and final) can be reduced into only one cause, is found in ARISTOTLE, *Physics*, book 2, chapter 7, 198a23-29 (see above).
22. A Medieval Spanish version of this work, probably written by Avner himself and different in some respects from the Hebrew version, is found in only one manuscript (Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, *Vaticanus latinus* 6423, folios 41v-89v), which has been edited by Walter METTMANN : ALFONSO DE VALLADOLID (ABNER AUS BURGOS), *Tešuvot la-Meharef. Spanische Fassung*, Opladen, 1998. On page 32, lines 21-29 of Mettmann's edition the above passage is translated as follows : "E aquellas son las que provó Aristotiles en la 'Methafisica' que Dios es las tres caussas estremadas en uno a

הם אשר ביאר אריסטו במה שאחר הטבע שהאלוה הוא <שלש> הסבות הקיצונות לכל העולם יחד, והן הפועל והצורה והתכלית. ועליהן כתב ניקולאו בשם אריסטו שהאלוה הוא אחד בעצם, שלשה בנבול; וזה כי אלה העניינים שהם עצם אחד, והוא האלוה – כלומר הענין שבו היה פועל את העולם, והענין שבו היה צורה אליו, והענין שבו היה תכלית אליו – לא יתכן לחשוב שיסתלקו ממנו, ואפילו במחשבה ולא אפילו כשנחשוב שהיה העולם אפס ונעדר, ואחר כך נמצא; שאילו כן לא היה הוא אלוה וסיבה ראשונה.

These facts are explained by Aristotle in the *Metaphysics*, (i.e.) that God is the three²³ distant causes of the whole world at once, i.e. the action, the form and the aim. And concerning them Nicholas in the name of Aristotle wrote that *God is one in substance, three in definition*, that is to say, one cannot think that those (principles), being one substance which is God — i.e. that with which He makes the world, and that with which He is its form, and that with which He is its aim — are separated from Him, even in thought, nor even when we consider that²⁴ the world was void and absent, and after this has come to be; (in fact), if so (i.e. if those principles depart from Him), He (= God) would be neither a god nor a First Cause.

Most likely Avner found this passage in the Arabic version of the *DPA*, probably written in the 9th century, and based upon a previous Syriac version of the Greek original text. The Arabic version might still have been extant in 13th century Spain, since it was apparently quoted by the Spanish Jewish philosopher Shem Tov Ibn Falquera (c. 1225-1295).²⁵ At any rate, it had certainly been found there in the 12th century, as there are a few brief passages from it quoted by Averroes.²⁶ Since both the

todo el mundo, que son la caussa agente e la formal e la final. Et dellas escrivio Nicolao, por nonbre de Aristotiles, que Dios es uno en substancia e tres en difinicon. Esto es que estas cossas que son una substancia, que es Dios bendicho. Quiero dezir : la manera con que es façetor del mundo, e la manera con que es fforma del, e la manera con que es fin del, non conviene a cuydar que fuessen tollidas del, nin aun en el pensamiento. Nin aun quando cuydassemos qu'el mundo non era, e despues fue. Que si assi fuesse, non seria el Dios nin causa primera". The Hebrew text transcribed above has been for the first time edited in Jonathan Leonard HECHT, *The Polemical Exchange Between Isaac Pollegar and Abner of Burgos/Alfonso de Valladolid according to Parma MS 2440 "Iggeret Teshuvat Apikoros" and "Teshuvot la-Meharef"*, unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, New York University, 1993 (*non vidimus*). I have consulted the original Parma manuscript and transcribed the relevant passage above; however, it should be pointed out that two copies of this manuscript are found in the Institute for Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts of the Jewish National and University Library of Jerusalem: the microfilm F 13444, and the CDRom n. 149.

23. "The three": *supra lineam* in the ms.

24. The sense of the words "even when we consider that" is doubtful in the context.

25. Cf. Mauro ZONTA, "The Zoological Writings in the Hebrew Tradition. The Hebrew approach to Aristotle's zoological writings and to their ancient and medieval commentators in the Middle Ages", in Carlos STEEL, Guy GULDENTOPS and Pieter BEULLENS, ed., *Aristotle's Animals in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, Leuven, Leuven University Press, 1999, p. 44-68.

26. Nicolaus' *DPA* is quoted several times in Averroes' *Long Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics* (see above, n. 1), as is pointed out, among others, by Maurice Bouyges, the editor of the original Arabic text. None of these quotations is concerned with Christian doctrine. However, it is remarkable that the only two detailed references to a Christian doctrine in Averroes' *Long Commentary* concerns the question of the divine Trinity. See Averroes' commentary on book *Lambda*, 1072b27-28 (AVERROES, *Tafsīr mā ba'd at-tabī'at*, ed. Maurice Bouyges, Notice + 3 vols., Beyrouth, 1938-1952, p. 1 619, l. 15-p. 1 623, l. 16) : "Therefore, the Christians were mistaken, in speaking of the Trinity in the substance, and as a consequence of this they could not escape from claiming that the God is One and Three since, when the substance (of God) is enumerated, that compound (substance) is one according to a (single) concept appended to the compound" (vol. III, p. 1 620, l. 4-6). Here Averroes seems to insist on the logical contradiction of the Christian Trinitarian idea. After having explained his own idea, i.e. that God is an absolutely "unique concept" (*ma'nan wāhid*), he concludes that "the Trinity ascribed to God [...] is a distinction in the mind, not in the existence, and it is something assumed by the (human) mind, like the things which are sometimes compound and sometimes united — not as the Christians claim, (i.e.) that they (= the Three persons of the Trinity) are

Greek and the Arabic texts have been lost, and there is only a very short Syriac summary of some parts of that work in a Cambridge manuscript as well as a number of quotations in Bar Hebraeus,²⁷ this passage, albeit very short, can be useful for the reconstruction of the lost original text.

A relevant question to explore, to which we cannot now foresee the answer, is whether, when, and by whom, a connection between the Holy Trinity and the Aristotelian theory of the four causes was established among Christian theologians.

The question is a good one because the theory is rarely found in literature before what we may think is the age of Nicolaus, even if we suppose that he wrote his work (as according to Bar Hebraeus) in the 4th century AD.

We have already quoted some parallels in pseudo-Athanasius. Nonetheless, at the beginning of the 5th c., St. Augustine's *De trinitate* almost ignores the connection between the idea of Trinity and the concept of "cause".²⁸

If we look for a clear comparison of the nature of the Holy Trinity to three of the four Aristotelian causes in the Latin world, we can find it in a much later period, around c. 1100, in connection with the school of Chartres. Theodoricus of Chartres (d. 1150), brother of Bernard of Chartres, in his *Tractatus de sex dierum operibus* (written before 1140), compared the material cause to the four elements, created by God ; the efficient cause, to the Father ; the formal cause, to the Son ; the final cause, to the Holy Spirit, which Theodoricus identified with the *anima mundi*.²⁹ Some decades later, in the *Polycraticus* by John of Salisbury (c. 1170), the three Aristotelian concepts of efficient cause, formal cause, and final cause, are said to be identified by

distinct concepts (ma'ānī mutagā'ira) which turn into one (thing)" (vol. III, p. 1623, l. 8-12). Finally, a critical reference to the Christian concept of God as being One as such, but many in definition is found in a short passage of another well-known work by Averroes, the *Tahāfut al-tahāfut* (*Destruction of the Destruction*, written against al-Ghazali's *Destruction of the Philosophy*). In this passage, Averroes affirms : "Because of this, if we concede that the existence of the soul is not conditioned by matter, we would be forced to concede that what is in actuality one outside the soul, (but) many in definition, would exist in separate existences. And this is the opinion of the Christians about the three hypostases (i.e. those of the Holy Trinity). In fact, they do not think that they (i.e. these hypostases) are attributes appended to (God's) substance : according to them, they are multiples in definition, and are many potentially, (but) not actually. Because of this, they state that He (= God) is three Unities (lit. "three One"), i.e. (he is) one actually and many potentially" (AVERROËS, *Tahafot at-tahafot*, ed. Maurice Bouyges, Beyrouth, 1930, p. 301, l. 4-8 ; chapter 5, paragraph 25, end, and 26). A more detailed analysis of the contents and meanings of these three passages, as well as of their importance for the history of the knowledge of Christian Trinitarian doctrine among Medieval Arabo-Islamic philosophers, should be the object of a forthcoming study.

27. Cf. Mauro ZONTA, "Il compendio aristotelico di Nicola Damasceno : nuovi dati dalla tradizione siriana", in Rosa BIANCA FINAZZI and Alfredo VALVO, ed., *Pensiero e istituzioni del mondo classico nelle culture del Vicino Oriente*, Alessandria, Edizioni dell'Orso, 2001, p. 315-339.
28. Apparently, Augustine might have stated something similar only when he wrote that *prima et summa causa non est nisi voluntas Dei* (*De trinitate* 3,19).
29. See Nikolaus M. HÄRING, ed., *Commentaries on Boethius by Thierry of Chartres and His School*, Toronto, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1971, p. 556, l. 50-p. 557, l. 55 : *In materia igitur quae est quatuor elementa operatur summa Trinitas ipsam materiam creando in hoc quod est efficiens causa ; creatam informando et disponendo in eo quod est formalis causa ; informatam et dispositam diligendo et gubernando in eo quod est finalis causa. Nam Pater est efficiens causa, Filius vero formalis, Spiritus sanctus finalis, quatuor vero elementa materialis*. The identification of the Holy Spirit with the *anima mundi* was condemned by the Church at the Synod of Sens in 1140 : see p. 47.

Plato (!). God's strength, wisdom, and goodness, according to the author, correspond to the three persons of the Holy Trinity.³⁰ Accepting this, one has to assume that the Christ is identified with God's wisdom, as well as with the *Logos*, already in Origenes.

A similar interpretation is apparently found in Albert the Great (1193-1280), who may have implicitly identified the Father with the efficient cause, His idea (i.e. the *Logos*, his Son) with the formal cause, His goodness (very probably, the Holy Spirit) with the final cause.³¹ Finally, it should be pointed out that John Duns Scotus (c. 1265-1308), in his *De primo principio*, also defines God as the efficient cause, eminent (formal ?) cause, and the final cause.³²

What was the direct or indirect source of this idea ? It is still difficult to believe that its diffusion in Europe after c. 1100 might have been the consequence of the diffusion of a Latin translation of Nicolaus' work — after all, no positive trace of the existence of such translation has been found. And we must keep in mind that Nicolaus, being more of a summarizer in philosophy than a theologian himself, is unlikely to be more than a secondary source for this intriguing and peculiar version of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity in Aristotelian terms. The question thus remains open.

30. See JOHN OF SALISBURY, *Polycraticus*, book 7, chapter 5 (PL 199, 645D), where he affirms that *in Timaeo... manifeste videtur exprimere Trinitatem, quae Deus est, efficientem causam constituens in potentia Dei, in sapientia formalem, finalem in bonitate*, “in the *Timaeus*... [Plato] indubitably appears to mention the Trinity which is God, postulating an efficient cause in the power of God, a formal cause in his wisdom, and a final cause in his goodness” (JOHN OF SALISBURY, *Frivolities of Courtiers and Footprints of Philosophers*, trans. Joseph B. Pike, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1938, p. 229-230). A quotation of Plato on this point is striking, but it perhaps can be explained by the fact that John of Salisbury was fundamentally a Neoplatonist. For this doctrine, cf. the connection between *divina podestate, somma sapienza* and *primo amore* in Dante ALIGHIERI, *Inferno*, III, 5-6 (and see also Dante ALIGHIERI, *Convivio*, II, v 8, where the above three terms are more explicitly referred to the three persons of the Holy Trinity). We owe this parallel and some suggestions for this paragraph to Ilaria Ramelli, to whom we are particularly grateful, although she is not responsible for any mistake or misunderstanding in it.

31. See ALBERT THE GREAT, *Summa Theologiae*, pars prima, tr. 4, q. 20, membrum 2, quaestio incidens (*Utrum Deus sit forma vel materia omnium*), solutio, where he affirms that *sicut dicit Bernardus in Canticis. Deus est esse omnium, non materiale, vel essenziale, sed causale. Et est causale secundum efficientem et formalem et finalem causam* (BEATI ALBERTI, *Operum, volumen XVII. Beati Alberti Magni... prima pars Summa theologiae*, ed. Petrus Jammy, Lugduni, 1651, p. 76b). However, here Albert does not explicitly connect this doctrine to the Trinity. (About Albert's opinion on Trinity, see Corey L. BARNES, “Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas on Person, Hypostasis, and Hypostatic Union”, *Thomist*, 72 [2008], p. 107-146 [non vidimus].) As a matter of fact, BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX wrote in his *Sermones in Cantica anticorum*, Sermo IV, 4, PL 183, 798B : *Sane esse omnium dixerim Deum, non quia illa sunt quod est ille, sed “quia ex ipso, et per ipsum, et in ipso sunt omnia”*. *Ecce est ergo omnium quae facta sunt ipse factor eorum, sed causale, non materiale* ; and it should be pointed out that the above passage stating that “everything is from God, via God, and in God”, which seems to justify the doctrine of the Trinity as three causes, is taken from St. Paul's *Epistle to Romans*, XI 36.

32. See John DUNS SCOTUS, *De primo principio*, 3 (p. 36 Müller), where he opens the chapter as follows : *Domine Deus noster, qui te primum esse ac novissimum praedicasti, doce servum tuum, te esse primum efficiens et primum eminens finemque ultimum, ostendere ratione, quod certissima fide tenet*. See *ibidem*, *passim*, e.g. p. 59 Müller : *haec tria non possunt separari... unde istae tres primitates videntur exprimere tres rationes summae bonitatis, necessario concurrentes, quae sunt summa comunicabilitas, summa amabilitas et summa integritas sive totalitas, bonum enim et perfectum idem*. This reference — as it appears to be — to God as an efficient cause, as a final cause and as the highest “perfection”, is followed by a reference to Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (which is noteworthy in itself, although the exact meaning of the reference is not completely clear).