

# Gundissalinus on the Angelic Creation of the Human Soul

## *A Peculiar Example of Philosophical Appropriation*

Nicola Polloni

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

*nicola.polloni@gmail.com*

### Abstract

With his original reflection—deeply influenced by many important Arabic thinkers—Gundissalinus wanted to renovate the Latin debate concerning crucial aspects of the philosophical tradition. Among the innovative doctrines he elaborated, one appears to be particularly problematic, for it touches a very delicate point of Christian theology: the divine creation of the human soul, and thus, the most intimate bond connecting the human being and his Creator. Notwithstanding the relevance of this point, Gundissalinus ascribed the creation of the human soul to the angels rather than God. He also stated that the angels create the souls from prime matter, and through a kind of causality which cannot be operated by God. What are the sources of this unusual and perilous doctrine? And what are the reasons which led Gundissalinus to hold such a problematic position? This article thoroughly examines the theoretical development and sources of Gundissalinus's position, focusing on the correlations between this doctrine, the overall cosmological descriptions expounded by Gundissalinus in his original works, and the main sources upon which this unlikely doctrine is grounded: Avicenna and Ibn Gabirol.

### Keywords

soul – angels – Gundissalinus – Avicenna – Ibn Gabirol

## 1 Introduction

The problem of the origin of the human soul accompanies the history of Christian philosophy at least since Origen and Augustine.<sup>1</sup> Acceptation and refusal of different perspectives, such as the traducianist or the pre-existentialist positions, slowly led to an almost shared stance on the origin of the human souls, created directly by God and infused into the body at some point during or after conception. The emergence of a shared position in later medieval philosophy, though, is marked by the formulation of different theories and hypotheses, which have had less success, but yet have appeared to have influenced, sometimes slightly and quietly, the Latin debate. By this point of view, the decades between the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth centuries are among the most fascinating periods of Western philosophy. Circulation and appropriation of fresh new Arabic and Greek knowledge provided the bases for different approaches to the main problems engaged with by the Latin tradition, often producing rather peculiar doctrines.

One of the most striking examples of the cross-cultural pollination which marked those decades is provided by the works of Dominicus Gundissalinus (ca 1125—post 1190). Latin translator of important Arabic works,<sup>2</sup> Gundissalinus is a main character of the twelfth-century translation movement which found in Toledo its most eminent venue. Gundissalinus, though, also engaged with philosophical reflection, producing a set of philosophical treatises.<sup>3</sup> In these works, the Toledan philosopher realised a rather peculiar theoretical merging among Latin and Arabic sources, directly and crucially contributing to the intricate process of doctrinal appropriation of Arabic philosophy in the central decades of the Middle Ages.

Many of Gundissalinus's original doctrines are grounded on a syncretic approach: the main characteristic of his speculation, indeed, is Gundissalinus's attempt at according two opposite philosophical perspectives, that is,

- 
- 1 See Pier F. Beatrice, *The Transmission of Sin: Augustine and the Pre-Augustinian Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Ronnie J. Rombs, *Saint Augustine and the Fall of the Soul: Beyond O'Connell and His Critics* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006); and Benjamin P. Blosser, *Become Like the Angels: Origen's Doctrine of the Soul* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012).
  - 2 See Dag N. Hasse and Andreas Büttner, "Notes on Anonymous Twelfth-Century Translations of Philosophical Texts from Arabic into Latin on the Iberian Peninsula," in *The Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin Reception of Avicenna's Physics and Cosmology*, ed. by Dag N. Hasse and Amos Bertolacci (Berlin—Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), 313–70.
  - 3 See Nicola Polloni, *Domingo Gundisalvo. Una introducción* (Madrid: Sínderesis, 2017), 17–38.