

Maimonides on the Eternity of the World
Haim Kreisel

I confess that it is hard to read Maimonides' account of creation without feeling that he not only pays lip service to the idea but he really means it. Why else would he go to such pains to defend this doctrine philosophically and not only on religious grounds? Moreover, Maimonides does not simply go through the motions of proving creation, but he displays a great deal of philosophic ingenuity, and develops some solid philosophic arguments that improve upon those found in his sources, while still not abandoning the principles of Aristotle's physics to which he is committed. This is hardly the move we would expect of someone hinting to an esoteric position, as Ken, following Herbert Davidson, argues. The presentation of standard but weak philosophic arguments is indeed a possible way of subtly alluding to an esoteric position, as Strauss has maintained, essentially reiterating a position advanced already by medieval thinkers. But that a strong philosophic argument should be interpreted as not being seriously held by its author – such an argument appears to be the product of a case of perverse thinking. It is easy to see the motivation of some of the medievals in making such a move, such as Narboni who suggested that Maimonides in fact believed in the eternity of the world, and that the fundamental flaws

he perceived in Maimonides' criticism of the Aristotelian position should be interpreted as signaling his secret agreement with Aristotle. He himself was convinced in the truth of the Aristotelian position, Maimonides' arguments notwithstanding, and was at pains to interpret his master, Maimonides, as agreeing with the truth as he saw it. But the modern interpreter no longer is burdened with this consideration. The opposite is the case. Maimonides' belief in creation, even creation *ex nihilo*, is more in keeping with contemporary science, and so his stated position on this issue is the one that those interested in the interpretation of tradition in light of science should take pains to defend.

Nevertheless, I have acquiesced to Ken's request to be the prosecuting or defending attorney, depending on your perspective, and argue that despite all the considerable evidence to the contrary, Maimonides in fact secretly believed in the eternity, *a parte ante*, of the world. After Ken in his book has done such a wonderful job in marshalling the philosophic evidence and presenting what appears at first glance an airtight argument for Maimonides' belief in creation, to argue the opposite is no simple task. Perhaps it may be likened to a lawyer who strongly suspects his client is guilty but deserves the best defense one can muster nonetheless.

I am not sure in the present context what would be the best manner to go about this task. I really have no *philosophic* arguments to muster to

show that Maimonides may have believed in eternity. This is not to say that I cannot point out philosophic problems with Maimonides' arguments – there are certainly problems, particularly in regard to his notion of divine wisdom and will, and the relation between them in the creation of the world. The antinomy between volition and necessity in Maimonides' thought, a crucial point in his proof of creation, is also not without certain critical problems. But even if I succeed in pointing out these flaws, does this in fact indicate that Maimonides held an esoteric position? Are we to say that every time we catch some flaw in a thinker's thought we are to interpret the thinker as not really meaning what he or she says?

My path, long favored by esotericists and most in keeping with Maimonides' remarks in the introduction to his treatise, is the textual path – comments in passing made by Maimonides that do not seem to promote the thrust of his argument, and when looked at carefully may be interpreted as in fact undermining his argument. There is almost a midrashic quality to such reading – looking for the textual irregularities in the Maimonidean text and then offering an interpretation that seems to fly in the face of what the text literally states or that reads much between the lines. While each of these readings taken individually can easily be dismissed, together they seem to support the view that there is an esoteric

subtext to Maimonides' treatise, one that extends also to the issue of creation.

So let us for a moment review the gist of Maimonides' position in the *Guide* in regard to creation. According to Maimonides, the monotheistic idea is proven if one accepts either creation or the eternity of the world. God's unique existence then is not the issue here. Nor is the order of nature the issue, for Maimonides accepts the order of nature in its Aristotelian form even if the world is created, and he rejects completely the Kalam's view on this matter. One may further argue that Maimonides regards creation as providing a better foundation for accepting the order of nature as posited by Aristotle than does the doctrine of eternity. Maimonides does not push this point because it is not the one he is most interested in advancing. The main point that he wishes to argue is that creation proves that God possesses volition and only by accepting divine volition can we have revelatory religion and all the theological doctrines associated with it. The God of Aristotle has no role to play in history, is not a Law-Giver, does not send prophets on missions, cannot perform miracles, nor does Aristotle's deity reward and punish individuals in accordance with their actions. The God of Aristotle is the deity of an eternally unchanging natural order. While creation may better explain this order than eternity, according to Maimonides' explicit argument, one hardly needs creation to posit such an order. One needs

creation to posit the exceptions to the order. As Guttman succinctly notes regarding Maimonides' doctrine of creation: "It relieves Maimonides of the necessity of interpreting the religious ideas of God's activity and his relationship to the world in terms of immanent, teleological, and largely impersonal dynamism. He can now reinvest these ideas with their original meaning, though he makes only sparing and very cautious use of this possibility (*Philosophies*, p. 192)." Or as Maimonides phrases it in 2.25: "Know that with a belief in the creation of the world in time, all the miracles become possible and the Law becomes possible".

Yet a close reading of the issues involved has led a number of interpreters of Maimonides' philosophy, myself among them, to conclude that he in fact interprets God's activity and His relationship to the world in terms of an immanent, teleological and largely impersonal dynamism. Maimonides treats prophecy as a natural phenomenon except for the caveat that God can miraculously withhold prophecy from the worthy. At the same time he invalidates his own examples for the miraculous withholding of prophecy, leaving such miracle only as a theoretical possibility that never materialized and apparently never will. Only Mosaic prophecy and the Revelation at Sinai continue to be treated as supernatural phenomena in his discussion of prophecy, as is the case in his earlier writings. But in this case too there are passages in the *Guide*

that can be interpreted as alluding to an esoteric position as I showed in my book on prophecy.

When one turns to Maimonides' discussion of providence, an esoteric position, in essential agreement with Aristotle, is presented in a manner that borders on the exoteric. Maimonides starts out by indicating that according to the opinion of the Law, human beings possess free will and all that befall them, good and bad, are determined according to their just deserts. Immediately he modifies his view to indicate that individual providence, now treated as only the protection and not calamities experienced by humans, is in proportion to the perfection of the intellect, while everything else that happens to them is by chance as is the case with the other species. Maimonides leads us step by step to the conclusion that the intellect itself is the mode of providence given to human beings since it allows the individual to anticipate most evils and take action to avoid them. It also directs them to lead a life style which minimizes the evils normally occurring to human beings. The fact that Maimonides in his commentary on Job distinguishes Elihu's opinion, presumably representing Maimonides' own, and the opinion of Eliphaz, which he treats as false and equates with the opinion of the Law, hardly leaves any doubt that Maimonides eschews the view of God's immediate role in extending providence to individuals. The intellect is the human being's guardian angel.

As for miracles, Maimonides' position on how to understand them is far from clear. In the case of the most important miracle associated with the faith, namely, the resurrection of the dead - leaving aside the revelation at Sinai which Maimonides treats as a unique event belonging to a different category altogether - Maimonides apparently did not accept it, his disclaimers to the opposite in his *Treatise on Resurrection* notwithstanding. This is at least the conclusion that a close reading of all his pronouncements on the subject appears to lead. Other miracles he seems to regard as anomalies in nature. I have argued elsewhere that he may even have accepted the view that the prophet himself is the author of some of the miracles, though I confess that the evidence here is very sketchy at best. In the present talk, I clearly cannot walk the audience step by step through all the available evidence that supports my conclusions on these issues. There is a good deal of scholarly literature on each of the topics which shows that there is a strong basis for arguing that Maimonides maintained an esoteric position, though Davidson in his recent book on Maimonides chose to ignore the stronger arguments almost completely, while rhetorically, I am tempted to say sophistically, dismissing the esoteric reading out of hand. The point is that when one looks at the issues Maimonides discusses after he lays down the doctrine of creation, one not only sees that after showing God's volition to act freely and in a direct manner he "makes only sparing and very cautious

use of this possibility” in the words of Guttman. One sees reasons for questioning whether he made any use of this possibility at all, certainly on all issues aside from the revelation of the Law. Even on this point I argue elsewhere there is room to question whether Maimonides’ God in fact personally informed Moses of each commandment word for word by means of a created voice. And so if one accepts the evidence for an esoteric reading of Maimonides on these issues – certainly a big if for those who have not closely examined the issues or have examined the issues and remain unconvinced - one arrives at a strange situation: Maimonides believes in creation on philosophic as well as religious grounds, but treats the divine governance of the world, including the phenomena associated with revelatory religion, in a manner that completely conforms to the philosophic world view. Let us keep in mind that Maimonides had before him the model presented by Alfarabi, a philosopher he greatly admired, who explained the fundamental doctrines of revelatory religion in a naturalistic manner.

Maimonides labels creation the most important principle of the Law after the existence of the deity because of his appreciation of the fact that the vast majority of believers could not accept the divine origin of the Torah without belief in creation. It is no wonder that Maimonides works hard to defend this belief given the stakes involved. After writing the *Guide*, he goes so far as to reformulate the fourth principle of the

faith to include creation, while according to the original formulation stressing the unique nature of the eternity of God, one could accept this principle while still believing in the eternity of the world.

Up to this point in the argument I have not made any direct case for interpreting Maimonides as believing in eternity. My argument has simply been that if Maimonides holds an esoteric position regarding a number of fundamental theological issues – a position which is a far easier one to prove – then at least one has grounds to wonder if the same is not the case with creation. After all, after accepting creation Maimonides could have used the doctrine of divine volition which he has purportedly proven to advance a completely miraculous understanding of prophecy, more in keeping with a literal reading of Scripture, and a supernatural approach to divine providence. The latter are treated by him as esoteric doctrines belonging to the secrets of the Torah that are not to be understood in accordance with a literal reading of Scripture. Yet by proving creation Maimonides has removed the *philosophic* obstacles to a literal reading, though he nevertheless rejects such a reading - on some points explicitly. Given this fact, one at least has a basis for wondering whether Maimonides' adoption of an esoteric position is not also the case with the doctrine of creation.

The textual evidence in support of the position that Maimonides believed in a world without beginning is certainly of a subtle nature, as

one reading the studies on this issue show. Maimonides' stated position in 2.25 that if the eternity of the world would be proven demonstrably, he could certainly interpret Scripture accordingly, just as he did in the case of the corporeal descriptions of God which is a more difficult move from a textual standpoint, was already picked up in the Middle Ages as a possible hint to an esoteric position. As Roslyn has recently argued, it is strange that Maimonides favors a literal reading of Scripture on a topic he characterizes as belonging to the secrets of the Law while on all other issues belonging to this category Maimonides chooses a figurative interpretation. In light of what I have argued till now, Maimonides by accepting creation has in essence shown that the entire Aristotelian world view is not demonstrable hence there is no need to reject a literal reading of Scripture on all the other issues as well. His definition of prophecy and his approach to the prophetic mission certainly flies in the face of a simple meaning of the biblical text.

The favorite piece of evidence for esotericists from the Middle Ages to the present on the issue of creation relates to Maimonides' presentation of 3 opinions on prophecy, explicitly comparing them to the three opinions he presents on the question of the creation of the world. The mental gymnastics practiced by the exotericists who tried to show that creation *ex nihilo* most closely corresponds to the opinion brought in the name of the Law that prophecy is a natural phenomenon that God at

times miraculously withholds from the worthy, and that creation *ex nihilo* does not correspond to the opinion of the masses that God grants prophecy to whom He wills without the person possessing any fixed qualifications – a position Maimonides completely dismisses – simply is not convincing, particularly in light of the problematic nature of the other match ups that result if one adopts this view. Ken’s suggestion, already advanced by Abarbanel, that one should not look for a one to one match-up also is problematic since why would Maimonides then point out the relation between the two subjects.

One other frequently adduced bit of evidence for an esoteric position is Maimonides’ apparent contradiction involving emanation. In 2.12 of the *Guide* he agrees with this doctrine, while in 2.22 he criticizes this doctrine in detail. Davidson, following Hyman, argues that there is no contradiction since Maimonides could hold the view that the world begins emanating from God with the act of creation, a doctrine that Altmann had shown is the view of Isaac Israeli. Ken criticizes this view, correctly in my opinion, but his own view that Maimonides never really embraces the doctrine of emanation I find also to be problematic. In short, I think there is a contradiction here, but I will not belabor this point.

At any rate, when one starts looking at the *Guide* with at least a suspicion that he holds an esoteric position, one finds more and more

signs in support of this interpretation. Perhaps in some cases these readings can be attributed to the overly creative imagination of the interpreter, but I certainly don't think all of them can be so easily dismissed. Let me list two such readings which I have brought in a recent article.

In 2.22, in the midst of his critique of the Aristotelian doctrine of emanation, Maimonides ridicules this doctrine by claiming that it leads to the disgraceful conclusion that, "it would follow that the deity, whom everyone who is intelligent recognizes to be perfect in every kind of perfection, could, as far as all the beings are concerned, produce nothing new in any of them; if He wished to lengthen a fly's wing or to shorten a worm's foot, He would not be able to do it. (p. 319)" In short Aristotle's deity is completely impotent – certainly a conclusion that no one is prepared to accept. What is significant in this case is Maimonides' next sentence, one in which he essentially undermines his own argument. "But Aristotle will say that He would not wish it and that it is impossible for Him to will something different from what is; that it would not add to His perfection but would perhaps from a certain point of view be a deficiency." Maimonides does not proceed to rebut Aristotle's counter-argument as we would expect him to do but allows Aristotle to have the last word on this matter, thereby signaling his agreement with Aristotle's position. Indeed for Maimonides, God created the world in a perfect

manner so how could He wish to introduce any change, certainly any permanent change, in what he created as he himself maintains in 2.29.

Another example of a possible allusion to an esoteric position on the issue of creation is a comment made in passing in 3.45 in his discussion of the reason for the image of two cherubim on the ark of the Law. Maimonides begins his discussion with the following remark: “It is known that the fundamental principle of belief in prophecy precedes the belief in the Law. For if there is no prophet, there can be no Law. The prophet receives prophetic revelation only through the intermediary of an angel. (p. 576)” Maimonides concludes: “Consequently it has been made clear that belief in the existence of angels precedes the belief in prophecy and the belief in prophecy precedes the belief in the Law.” Some of you may be wondering where creation enters into the picture. This is exactly the point, it doesn’t. Belief in angels upon which prophecy and the Law are dependent, that is to say belief in Separate Intellects and the faculties of the soul of the prophet, is in harmony also with the doctrine of eternity. In short, one may believe in prophecy and the Law even if one does not believe in creation. Lest this point be completely lost on his readers Maimonides repeats it in the continuation of his discussion: “Thus it has become clear through what we have stated before that the belief in the existence of angels is consequent upon the belief in the existence of the deity and that thereby prophecy and the Law are

established as valid [...] this correct opinion, *coming in second place after the belief in the existence of the deity*, constituting the originative principle of belief in prophecy and the Law, and refuting idolatry, as we have explained. (p. 577)” Note that belief in angels does not simply supplement belief in creation in this context – it replaces it. No longer does creation come in second place after belief in the existence of the deity. I have no time to analyze this point in full but I feel this is a good example of the seventh type of contradiction discussed by Maimonides in the introduction of his treatise. I have a number of other examples of what can be interpreted as allusions to an esoteric position on the issue of creation, but I would like to return now to Maimonides’ philosophic argument on behalf of creation.

I noted at the beginning of the talk that despite the strength of Maimonides’ argument there appears to be a number of flaws with the positions he advances. I would like to point out at least one flaw that seems to involve a contradiction in Maimonides’ own thought, hence perhaps qualifying it as signaling an esoteric position in accordance with the seventh form of contradiction. Maimonides’ version of the doctrine of particularization is different than the argument of Al-Ghazzali against the philosophers, as Davidson has shown. Ken has picked up on this point and elaborated upon it in his book. In Al-Ghazzali’s version, particularization of the direction of motion in the heavens is the result of

an arbitrary will. It would make no difference whatsoever if the heavens moved from East to West or from West to East. Once I can establish that things were particularized without any reference to wisdom, that wisdom has no role at all to play in certain choices, than I can establish a meaningful notion of divine volition. I can treat the very act of giving existence to the world, let alone when to give existence to the world, as an arbitrary choice, since there is no reason from the standpoint of wisdom to favor existence over non-existence. Maimonides does not go this route, a route which in a crucial sense may be a more convincing way to prove creation. Rather, Maimonides appears to treat all divine decisions as reflecting purpose, and I interpret the notion of “purpose” in Maimonides’ thought as combining wisdom and will. Indeed Maimonides frequently introduces the notion of divine wisdom and not just will alone in dealing with creation. Moreover, in 3.25 he treats all of God’s actions as good and excellent, namely, “that accomplished by an agent aiming at a noble end, I mean one that is necessary and useful, and achieves that end. (503)” Hence Maimonides feels that the direction and size of the spheres are not products of arbitrary will but of an unfathomable divine wisdom. Maimonides’ argument is that a carefully designed world in which all details have a purpose, that is to say are the product of wisdom and will, can only be maintained if one regards such world as being created. An eternal world is a necessary one, one in which

all parts of heaven should be uniform, and not a world that reflects a wisdom guiding the will to act in a purposive - and not an arbitrary - manner by giving existence to the many different qualities possessed by the heavenly bodies in accordance with the divine purpose.

I find Maimonides' reasons for dismissing the possibility of an *eternal* creation of such a world in accordance with divine purpose as not convincing, Ken's defense of Maimonides' position notwithstanding. I don't see why the two propositions, 1) the world always existed and 2) that it is the product of divine purpose, are treated by Maimonides' as irreconcilable, in particularly in light of the otherness of divine wisdom and the activities resulting from it in Maimonides' thought. Let us recall that one of the criticisms Maimonides aims against Aristotle is that the eternity of divine wisdom does not necessitate the eternity of the world since the unknowable divine wisdom may have regarded it preferable to create a world having a temporal beginning. This argument, however, can be turned against Maimonides himself. The unknowable divine wisdom may have regarded it as preferable to create an eternal world according to the divine purpose. Eternal creation is certainly not a conceptual impossibility so why dismiss this option. Furthermore, if existence is preferable to non-existence from the standpoint of wisdom, this option appears to be the better one, at least from a human perspective.

Furthermore, if, and I know that not everyone is prepared to accept this “if,” every divine choice for Maimonides is a product of wisdom, could God ever choose to act differently? Does not his very essence necessitate every choice? Only if we posit that there exist arbitrary choices, and that the very purpose underlying the creation of the world as we know it is such a choice, can we escape this dilemma. Yet in my reading of Maimonides he does not accept the existence of arbitrary choices – all divine actions are good and excellent in reference to their ends and not only to their means, even if we do not always fathom the wisdom underlying them. Let me add parenthetically that even the details of the commandments are not arbitrary for Maimonides, as Joseph Stern has shown, despite Maimonides’ explicit statement to the contrary. In short, we have arrived at the conclusion that God could never act differently than He does, He cannot choose to will or not will something, for He could never act contrary to wisdom and all choices are the product of divine wisdom.

As I have already noted, a philosophic flaw in the argument in itself hardly points to an esoteric position. Contradictions in Maimonides’ stance, however, may. In this case we can certainly point to what looks like a contradiction. Maimonides argues, as we have seen, that what is eternal and not changing is necessary, and necessary and volition are mutually exclusive. This argument appears to be based on the

Aristotelian principle that what is never realized through eternity is impossible, and what always exists is necessary. Yet does Maimonides consistently maintain this position? The answer is no. Consider Maimonides' position in regard to the destruction of the world. In 2.27 he writes: "However, in view of our claim, based on the Law, that things exist and perish according to His will, may He be exalted, and not in virtue of necessity, it is not necessary for us to profess that when He, may He be exalted, brings into existence a thing that had not existed, He must necessarily cause this existent to pass away. Rather does the matter inevitably depend on His will: if He wills, He causes the thing to pass away; and if He wills, He causes it to last; or it depends on what is required by His wisdom. It is accordingly possible that He should cause it to last for ever and ever and to endure as He Himself, may He be exalted, endures. (pp. 332-333)" The argument at first glance is a simple one. The Aristotelian natural principle that what is generated must also pass away does not hold in the case of the passing away of the world. Its continuous existence is due to divine will and not natural necessity just as is the case with its creation. But this leaves us with the strange conclusion that what is eternal – namely the existence *a parte post* of the world – is not necessary but the product of volition. Or let us formulate Maimonides' position in a slightly different manner. God could destroy the world but He never will. This certainly sounds like another way for saying that the

eternal existence of the world is necessary. Isn't that what Maimonides maintained in reference to the eternity *a parte ante* of the world? If in regard to the future existence of the world eternity does not exclude volition, how can Maimonides deny that this is not also the case with the past existence of the world?

There is yet another passage where Maimonides treats an eternal action as the product of choice and not necessity. In his description of the spheres and Separate Intellects in 2:7 he writes: “[...] they apprehend their acts and have will and free choice with regard to the governance committed to them, just as we have will with regard to that which from the foundation of our existence has been committed to us and given over to our power. Only we sometimes do things that are more defective than other things, and our actions are preceded by privations; whereas the intellects and the spheres are not like that, but *always* do that which is good. (p. 266)” In short, volition on one hand and acting through eternity in the same manner without change in accordance with wisdom on the other hand, are not regarded by Maimonides as mutually exclusive propositions. Again we may ask, why does Maimonides subsequently argue differently when it comes to the origin of the world? There seems to be different definitions of will and volition at the heart of Maimonides' different discussions, not all of them contradicting the notion of the willful creation of a world without beginning.

The problems and even contradictions in Maimonides' argument on behalf of creation that I have pointed out are probably not insurmountable - we will hear soon from Roslyn on her take on this issue - and they should certainly not obscure the fact that Maimonides does present an excellent defense of creation. So why was Maimonides so philosophically ingenious in his defense of creation, if he did not really favor this doctrine? Perhaps he was interested in burying his esoteric position on this issue given his perception of the religious stakes involved. It was important for him to provide his co-religionists with good philosophical reasons to adopt creation in order to strengthen their commitment to the religious tradition. In short, what better defense against the philosophers can there be than by showing that their position not only conflicts with religion but also with philosophic reasoning, even if secretly Maimonides favored the philosophic position and felt that all the salient doctrines of tradition could be understood in accordance with the philosophic world view. At any rate, I think that the esotericist can only hope to show that there are valid reasons for adopting this type of interpretation of the Maimonidean text, even in regard to the issue of creation. Given the strength of Maimonides' explicit defense of creation, and the defense that Maimonides' defense has received in Ken's book, that in itself is no small task.