

Maimonides on Creation

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Let me begin with a methodological assumption. The only way to determine Maimonides' view of creation is to evaluate the strengths (or weaknesses) of his arguments. Here I am in substantial agreement with Herbert Davidson, who said we can imagine a philosopher presenting bad or sophistic arguments on behalf of a position he does not hold. (On my view, Plato's does this in the Protagoras, when he has Socrates argue that virtue is a matter of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain.) But it is hard to see why a philosopher would present good, and in some cases, ingenious arguments in defense of something he regarded as false. So I take my task to be assessing what Maimonides says in light of the evidence at his disposal.

As I see them, the arguments take two forms: the first group tries that show that the creation of the world de novo (improperly translated by Pines as "the creation of the world in time") is possible. Put otherwise, these arguments seek to show that it is possible for there to be a first movement and thus a first instant in time. The second group tries to show that based on everything we know, the creation of the world de novo is the best explanation we have. I take it as uncontroversial that even these arguments are valid, Maimonides would not have demonstrated creation de novo. All we would have done is show that it is a reasonable alternative, and on the best case scenario, the most likely one.

It could be said therefore that the burden of proof on this issue rests with Maimonides' opponents for they have to show that the creation of the world de novo is impossible, that it constitutes a logical or metaphysical absurdity. By the same token, those who think Maimonides rejected creation de novo have a similar burden of proof for they have to show that he regarded it as a logical or metaphysical absurdity. To the best of my knowledge, no one has met either burden.

Let us now ask what these arguments are. Maimonides divides them between arguments derived from the nature of the world and arguments derived from the nature of God. Let us look at the arguments derived from the nature of the world. In assessing them, we encounter an inference whose implausibility is hard to miss: we can infer something about the origin of the world by observing how it is at present. Put otherwise: If there is no evidence of creation de novo in the things we observe, the creation de novo of the world as a whole is impossible.

Here in abbreviated form are the arguments.

(1) It is impossible for motion to come to be or pass away because if there were a first motion, there would have to be another motion prior to the first motion. Therefore the idea of a first motion is absurd. This argument assumes that motion requires an agent and a patient. If there were a first motion, something would have to rouse the agent of that motion into activity. The act of doing so would involve a motion prior to the first motion; hence the absurdity.

(2) Prime matter is not subject to generation or corruption because if it were generated, it would have to be produced out of something prior to prime matter, which is absurd. Therefore prime matter is eternal.

(3) Heavenly matter has no contrary because its nature is to move in a circle. If it has no contrary, it cannot be generated or destroyed.

(4) Everything that is generated must possibility the possibility of generation prior to the act of generation. What substratum accounts for the possibility of its generation? Assuming that the world was created de novo, there could be no such substratum.

Maimonides' response to all four arguments is to say, correctly in my opinion, they assume the principles that explain the origin of a thing are the same as those that explain its current nature. In philosophic terms, they assume creation is a species of change and therefore must involve a transition from potency to act. But, Maimonides insists, we have been given no reason for why this is so, and contrary to Aristotle, experience suggests it is not so: the form an animal assumes when it has grown up is often very different from the circumstances of conception or gestation. Thus nothing we have been given prevents us from saying that while prime matter cannot be generated in Aristotle's sense of the term, it can be created.

The arguments derived from the nature of God involve another assumption whose implausibility is hard to miss: that we know enough about the nature of God to make these inferences in the first place. Students of Maimonides will recognize that in his opinion, all we can know is that God is, not what God is. This was not true for Aristotle, who describes God's attributes without the slightest hesitation.

Again, in abbreviated form, the arguments are as follows:

(5) If God created the world de novo, then God must have gone from potency into act. For any number of reasons, this is impossible.

(6) An agent acts at one time rather than another due to impediments or incentives. Because neither applies to God, the idea that God created the world de novo is absurd.

(7) If God is perfect, anything God makes must be perfect. If the world is perfect of its kind, and serves no purpose beyond itself, it must be eternal. Likewise, if God's wisdom is eternal, and the world was created from God's wisdom, the world must be eternal as well.

(8) How could God be idle at one minute and active at another? In fact, how could God be idle at all?

Beyond these arguments, there is a further consideration: all people affirm the eternity of the heavens.

Although these arguments derive from Proclus rather than Aristotle, they all are based on the assumption that the effect must resemble the cause. If God is active and eternal, the world must be active and eternal as well. Maimonides' strategy in answering them is to say that the tight similarity that obtains between cause and effect need not obtain between an act of will and the object willed in the act. Thus it is possible to will today that one do something tomorrow. Although the cause is present and active, the effect is postponed. By the same token, a single act of will – say the intention to write a book – can result in multiple effects over a long period of time.

This distinction allows Maimonides to suggest – I emphasize that it is only a suggestion – a further distinction between willing change and changing one's will. The purport of this distinction is that only the latter would imply imperfection in God; the

former (willing change) would not. If so, there would be no absurdity in saying that God willed eternally for the world to have a specific history.

Here too we must be careful with the burden of proof. Maimonides is not saying, nor could he say, that he knows God exercises a will. That would take him well beyond the limits of negative theology. All he is saying is that it is possible God does. If it is possible, then the proponents of eternity have not shown conclusively that the world is eternal. In other words, arguments 5-8 do not constitute a demonstration either singly or collectively. It is, I submit, difficult to see how Maimonides could have thought otherwise given his repeated insistence that a philosopher of Aristotle's ability could not fail to have appreciated what constitutes a demonstration and what does not. This insistence is of a piece with Maimonides earlier claim (1.31, p. 66) that "in all things whose true reality is known through demonstration there is no tug of war and no refusal to accept a thing proven" unless one is an ignoramus. As he surely knew, philosophers have been debating creation and eternity for thousands of years (1. 71, p. 180).

That takes us to arguments for the likelihood of creation. Here Maimonides makes repeated use of the Argument from Particularity. Why, the argument asks, are things this way rather than that? Maimonides is clear that for some things – why did this leaf fall from the tree before that one? – there is no reason to expect science to give an answer because science deals with regularities. But there is every reason to think science ought to be able to explain planetary orbits, whose regularity is well known. The problem is we have regularity with no available explanation and no real hope of finding one. More specifically we have the problem of explaining the diversity of the celestial spheres, the direction of their rotation, and the speed of their rotation.

Given the principle that different movements imply different forms, we can conclude that the matter of the celestial spheres is one because all move in a circular fashion, while their specific forms are different because some rotate from east to west while others rotate from west to east. Since the matter of the stars and planets is fixed in that of the celestial sphere in which they are situated, one type of matter moves because it is carried around by something else while the other type moves by itself. This leads Maimonides to conclude that there must be two types of celestial matter (2.19, p. 309): one for the star and one for the sphere. If so, how can one type be attached to another and not mix with it? Given that the matter of the sphere is everywhere the same, why are the stars and planets attached to their respective spheres at one point rather than another? And why are certain stretches of the sphere of the fixed stars heavily populated while others are relatively empty?

Indeed, why are there multiple spheres at all? If God is one and simple, and if the spheres proceed from God by necessity, how do we get from a unitary cause to a plurality of effects given that “It is impossible that anything but a single simple thing should proceed from a simple thing” (1.22, p. 317). According to Aristotelian principles, the only thing God could produce is another simple thing, and the only thing that could proceed from that is yet another simple thing, so that even if there were a thousand steps in the process of emanation, everything should be simple – a conclusion plainly at variance with the facts.

Beyond these difficulties, there is the fact that some spheres rotate faster than others. For example the spheres of the planets rotate faster than the sphere of the fixed stars. To make matters worse, while there are nine primary spheres, there had to be over

forty secondary spheres to account for the specific motion of the planets. What causes one sphere to receive one form and another sphere to receive a different one? As Maimonides points out, Aristotle and his followers are stuck with facts that do not seem to have any reason or purpose.¹⁵

It is not just the diversity of the spheres that poses a problem but the specifics of their movement. Since each sphere imparts motion to the one below it, it would be natural to suppose that the closer one gets to earth, the slower is the rotation. But experience confirms that this is not the case. As Maimonides observes (GP 2.19, p. 307): “We see that in case of some spheres, the swifter of motion is above the slower; that in the case of others, the slower of motion is above the swifter; and that, again in another case, the motions of the spheres are of equal velocity though one be above the other. There are also other very grave matters if regarded from the point of view these things are as they are in virtue of necessity.

In addition to the velocity of celestial motion, there is also the question of its direction. Why does it often appear to reverse itself with one sphere moving in the opposite direction of the one directly above it? The need for reverse movement, or what Aristotle called a “counteracting sphere,” can be understood if we recognize that the retrograde motion of every planet is unique to it. Thus the secondary spheres needed to explain the motion of Saturn must be reversed when we start to explain the motion of Jupiter, and Jupiter’s reversed when we start to explain the motion of Mars. In all 22 counteracting spheres were needed for Aristotle’s system to work. Reverse motion is all the more difficult to explain given the belief that there is no space or vacuum between one sphere and another. Finally there is the question of why the fixed stars do not exhibit

retrograde motion, the planets do, but the sun and moon, which according to Aristotle are closest to the earth, also do not.

Maimonides considers Aristotle's suggestion that the particularity exhibited by the spheres can be accounted for by the separate intellects with one intellect assigned to each sphere, but he responds by saying that the separate intellects are of no help on this matter. Since the intellects are not bodies, they have no spatial position relative to the sphere with which they are connected. It is then hard to see why desire for one intellect would result in motion from east to west at one speed while desire for another would result in motion from west to east at another.

With his usual respect for Aristotle, Maimonides claims that he himself realized that his account of the heavens is weak and makes reference to "strange and bizarre causes." As Maimonides recognizes, there is always the possibility that someone will come with an explanation of phenomena that now seem puzzling. We should keep in mind however that he says this in a context that assumes part of the Aristotelian theory is true: namely Aristotle's account of natural motion, which rules out epicycles or eccentric orbits. To explain what is puzzling one would have to retain the idea of natural motion and account for all the phenomena mentioned above. I think it is relevant to say that not only did no one succeed in doing so but no one even came close. So Maimonides' skepticism about astronomy was perfectly justified given the tools he had to work with. Citing Psalm 115.16 ("The heavens are the heavens of the Lord, but the earth hath He given to the sons of man"), he concludes that only God knows the nature, substance, motions, and causes of the heavenly bodies and that they are too far away and too high in place or rank for us to agree on assumptions from which conclusions can be drawn.

All of this leads Maimonides to say (3.13, 452): “What exists, its causes, and its effects, could be different from what they are.” Put otherwise, the world that we inhabit does not present itself as a system governed by strict necessity but as a system in which, for all we know, things might have been different. Needless to say, the move from this to will and purpose in nature is fraught with peril. The best Maimonides can claim is that will and purpose are compatible with contingency but not with necessity. But remember: this is not a proof for the certainty of creation, only its likelihood. Given everything we know, it is more likely that nature exhibits will and purpose than that it does not. If so, creation is more likely than eternity.

If there is an error in this reasoning – an error that a subtle reader is supposed to pick up – I fail to see what it is. Medieval astronomy was as speculative and as doubtful as Maimonides indicates. Copernicus was a long way off, and no one could have predicted that astronomy would change as radically as it did. If Maimonides was committed to an eternal world, then somewhere in the Guide there ought to be indications of how the arguments presented in chapters 2.19-2.24 are to be answered. Where are they? My reason for asking this question is to suggest that Maimonides’ skepticism about astronomy is much easier to reconcile with belief in creation than it is with belief in eternity. If he wished to defend eternity, he would have to answer the argument from particularity – at least as applied to the motions of the heavenly bodies. But nowhere are the outlines of such an answer given.

When I wrote Maimonides on the Origin of the World, I made one big mistake for which I could kick myself – hard. I failed to send a draft to Roslyn Weiss asking for comments. In any case, Roslyn recently published a review of my book in the Journal of

the American Academy of Religion showing that I had failed to answer a number of objections and thus failed to relieve all doubts. So with Roslyn's help, let me try to do a better job now.

The first objection points out that Maimonides bases his arguments for the existence and unity of God at Guide 1.71, pp. 180-181 on the assumption that the world is eternal. Note however that the passage occurs in a context where Maimonides is trying to distance himself from the Mutakallimun, who thought they could establish God's existence by first proving creation. If creation occurred, there must be a creator. Maimonides insists however that no demonstration of creation is available. So any proof of God's existence that assumes creation is doubtful. He goes on to say that he will side with the philosophers and prove God's existence by assuming eternity. Yes, the philosophers' proof is more rigorous than that of the Mutakallimun, but it would be a mistake to think Maimonides was completely satisfied with it either. In fact, he indicates that the full scope of his arguments is as follows. Creation implies the existence of God. Eternity implies the existence of God. Therefore God exists. Later, at 2.2, p. 252, he is more explicit: God exists "regardless of whether the world has come into being in time . . . or whether it has not come into being in time . . ." In fact, Maimonides is clear that for the purposes of this proof, eternity is a hypothesis (p. 239) not an established fact. This is consistent with his saying at 1.71 that the reason he is assuming eternity is not that he believes it or because he wants to concede it to the philosophers. More to the point, if the only way to prove the existence of God is to assume eternity, then all the arguments Maimonides offers against eternity at 2.14-24 would also count as arguments against God's existence. And if this were so, there is every reason to think Maimonides would

have done something to show they can be answered. But again I ask: where does he do this?

The second objection points out that when Maimonides sums up his position at 2.25, he does not say we should accept creation because the stronger argument supports it. Instead he says we should accept it because it destroys the foundation of the Law. My answer is that 2.25 deals with the practical implications of creation. If you don't accept creation, how can you accept the idea of commandment? From my standpoint, this is not Maimonides strongest argument, and it is noteworthy that he does not devote much space to it. Earlier (2.19, p. 303), when discussing the theoretical implications of creation, he said that the argument from particularity comes close to being a demonstration. This would be strong endorsement for something he does not believe. Later at 2.30, p. 349 he says that he supports the reading of bereshit that is compatible with creation. Even at 2.25, he (a) that the eternity of the world has not been demonstrated, and (b) that if the world were eternal, one would have to ask the questions raised by the argument from particularity and concludes there would be no way to avoid them "except through a recourse to unseemly answers . . ."

The third and fourth objections have to do with the external sense of Scripture. If, as Maimonides says, creation de novo and ex nihilo is the external sense of Scripture, does this not provide strong evidence that he rejected them? This is, I admit, a sticky problem. Much of the Guide is a polemic against taking the external sense as the true meaning. At 2.17, p. 298, Maimonides says that when it comes to creation, Scripture must not be taken in its external sense. But at 2.25, p. 329, as Roslyn points out, he says he will take it in its external sense. What is going on? Here I follow Pines (p. 298, n. 8)

in holding that when Maimonides says he is not going to take Scripture in its external sense, he is referring to referring to the idea that creation is a temporal act, meaning an act with a beginning, middle, and end. If, as Maimonides insists repeatedly, time is an accident of and thus dependent on motion, this is impossible. Because the first motion is the beginning of time, it cannot take place in time.

This point comes out clearly at 2.30, p. 350, where Maimonides claims that everything in heaven and earth was created simultaneously. I take this to mean that, contrary to the impression one might get by reading Scripture literally, creation is a unique act that constitutes the origin of time and cannot be measured by time. This is perfectly compatible with saying that creation occurred de novo and ex nihilo. In fact, it follows from any reasonable interpretation of what is meant by de novo. I believe my interpretation is strengthened by Maimonides' comment at 2.29, p. 346, where he says: "Not everything mentioned in the Torah concerning the Account of the Beginning is to be taken in its external sense as the vulgar imagine." "Not everything" does not mean "nothing." In other words, this comment leaves open the possibility that some part of the Account of the Beginning is to be taken in its external sense.

The fifth objection asks how we would know the secret views of the Torah unless we studied physics and metaphysics. Put otherwise, we need physics and metaphysics to guide us or else we will wind up attributing patent nonsense to Scripture. Why, then, should we expect Scripture to teach us about the truth of creation? The answer is that we should not allow Scripture to teach us about the truth of creation if that means allowing it to trump physics and metaphysics just because it is Scripture. But this is not Maimonides' strategy. The thrust of his critique of physics and metaphysics is not that

they violate Scripture – remember the gates of figurative interpretation are not shut – but (1) they have not produced a demonstration of eternity, and (2) they have not given us adequate scientific explanations of planetary motion according to their own understanding of science. In other words, they have failed on their own terms. Were they to succeed on their own terms, Maimonides would have no choice but to follow them.

Where does all this get us? In my view, it puts Maimonides in the enviable position of being both respectful and critical of everything at his disposal. He respects physics and metaphysics when they succeed as science. When they can produce a demonstration, no appeal to prophetic or rabbinic authority can overturn it. But Maimonides is critical enough to realize that they cannot produce a demonstration on every question they set for themselves; hence his remark that philosophers have been debating creation for over 3,000 years. By the same token, Scripture is for Maimonides a source of truth. The problem is that identifying that truth can be a difficult and time-consuming process. In either case, there is then no short-cut painstaking analysis.

This takes us back to the point at which I began. To determine Maimonides' position, we have to follow the arguments and assess their cogency. When this is done, I believe the weight of the evidence points clearly in the direction of creation. As with Aquinas, so with Maimonides, the eternity of the world is still a logical possibility. Unless this were true, Maimonides could not use it as a hypothesis in proving God's existence. But saying that it is a logical possibility is a long way from saying it was his preferred position.

