

Elizabeth Ashkinazi

Ian Blecher

Jewish Philosophy

### **An Analysis of Maimonides' Conception on the Creation**

Maimonides, who is regarded by some as being the greatest Jewish philosopher of all time, understands the opening words of Genesis -- "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" in such a way that he believes in the creation of the world as being generated out of nothingness -- and having begun anew. Maimonides looks to Moses' conception of creation, which involves the world being created anew and from nothing. Maimonides also looks to the Aristotelian and Platonic views of creation and is not persuaded, partly due to their ideas of eternity along with "the virtue of necessity" and creation concerning physical matter, respectively. In his consideration of these alternatives, he ultimately maintains that the Torah's account of creation (the one which Moses most likely subscribes to) is the most plausible as compared with these differing and/or contrasting Platonic and Aristotelian alternatives, and thusly, it is worth believing in.

Maimonides' view of the creation of the world differs from the available alternatives, which include but are not limited to the Aristotelian and Platonic conceptions of creation, or rather, eternity and matter. Maimonides believes that the creation of the world starting anew and out of nothing is a plausible, (though unprovable) alternative. In his consideration of Moses' narrative of creation, Maimonides states that the world was "...brought into existence by God after having been purely and absolutely nonexistent, and that God, may He be exalted, had existed alone...Afterwards, through His will and His volition, He brought into existence out of

nothing all the beings as they are, time itself being one of the created things” (Guide 2.13). He maintains that by stating that there “WAS” a God before creating the world, there exists the implication that time is an accidental supposition in which time is imagined or constructed, rather than real -- a position that I would think opposes Aristotle’s, given the latter’s emphasis on eternity, eternal necessity and matter. Eternity and the existence of God are not compatible features in Maimonides’ mind. He argues that “...God's bringing the world into existence does not have a temporal beginning, for time is one of the created things. For if you affirm as true the existence of time prior to the world, you are necessarily bound to believe in the eternity [of the world].” This carries with it the notion that something had to have existed prior to the existence of God, and according to Maimonides, this cannot be so because of logical inconsistency. Time duly implies the existence of motion as well, and (according to Maimonides) since God is unmoving and no such object that is capable of movement existed before the existence of God -- motion could not proceed from the existence of time, and time and the subsequent movement of things are constructed by none other than God himself. Assuming the existence of another thing prior to the creation is incorrect, Maimonides dismissively asserts. Thusly, Maimonides is able to reconcile Moses’ view of creation with his own in his argumentation because of his view of time as being derived from God and God having newly created the world out of nothing. This he deems plausible according to the governance of the rules of logical consistency.

Next, Maimonides undertakes an analysis of the Platonic idea of creation and attempts to refute it. The world from this vantage point comes into existence as a result of matters and forms being moulded into some kind of creative project, almost -- “...there exists a certain matter that is eternal as the deity is eternal; and that He does not exist without it, nor does it exist without

Him” (Guide 2.13). Heaven is said to have been generated from something other than God.

Maimonides deems this a logical impossibility, since it is not possible that a being comprised of matter and form be created from something which does not exist in the first place or just simply cease to exist. The possibility of creation as arising from a series of matters and forms anew is sufficient, but not enough to articulate “nothingness” -- meaning that something that derives from something (from matter or a form, etc.) is not really derived from nothing, therefore, this argument does not hold and is implausible in comparison to that of the Torah.

Lastly, Maimonides invokes the Aristotelian argument for creation, which consists in eternity -- “He thinks that this being as a whole, such as it is, has never ceased to be and will never do so; that the permanent thing not subject to generation and passing-away, namely, the heaven, likewise does not cease to be; that time and motion are perpetual and everlasting and not subject to generation and passing-away” Additionally, however, an Aristotelian discussion of essence and nature is provided, pointing to the assertion that “...just as it is impossible that the deity should become nonexistent or that His essence should undergo a change, it is impossible that a volition should undergo a change in Him or a new will arise in Him” (Guide 2.13). Given that an essence of a thing (in the Aristotelian conception at least) is perhaps thought to be stable, this argument carries with it the implication that God cannot will something of his own because of this unchanging, eternal essence which binds him to a fixed volition BECAUSE of the nature of his existence, given that none of this could be produced without it. Furthermore, it makes sense why Maimonides, (who views God as being willful and yielding omnipotence) would take issue with this deterministic view of God. For one, this account seems implausible in relation to that of his own, given that will and essence are not one and the same -- “The fact that

it may wish one thing now and another thing tomorrow does not constitute a change in its essence and does not call for another cause; just as the fact that it acts at one time and does not act at another does not constitute a change” (Guide 2.18). Will defines itself, in a way, where it grants itself permission to change a course of action or thinking -- but this is accounted for and encapsulated by the essence, which already considers the changing, flighty will as being part of a general essence or state of being -- at least that is what I gather from Maimonides’ rebuttal.

Therefore, “...the true reality and the quiddity of will means: to will and not to will” -- Aristotle’s argument cannot possibly hold because he presumably views God as unable of being a free agent due to the system of essences that governs Aristotlian philosophic thought, moreover, mutability under such a system is not permitted. The world exists not because God wills it, but because of a prescribed, unchanging nature that is attributed to God himself, and thus, the world is governed by a sort of essentialism, as opposed to the decision-making of God. But how then, could something (the world) come out of nothing if there is no God available yet to will anything, let alone will the existence of the world? It sounds impossible. Maimonides argues that everything produced in time has a different state when it is final and actualized than when it is being generated and potentialized into existence (Guide 2.17). We could not really know the nature of creation then in all of its potential promise and the nature of creation as we understand it currently, because metamorphosis has occurred -- the world has been actualized, thereby producing a different nature altogether. Creation therefore remains a possibility, because the natures of the actuality of the creation of the world and the potentiality of its creation are entirely different beasts that cannot really be reconciled because, from the way I understand this argument, nature is probably not unitary -- it is more relative and encapsulating of the multiple

processes that govern a thing's coming-to-be. Therefore, "No inference can be drawn in any respect from the nature of a thing after it has been generated, has attained its final state, and has achieved stability in its most perfect state, to the state of that thing while it moved toward being generated" (Guide 2.17). Lastly, Maimonides questions whether or not God's changing his mind/wishes implies a change in essence. He deduces that "No, for the true reality and the quiddity of will means: to will and not to will" (Guide 2.18). The very definition of willing something implies fluidity and freedom, as mentioned before -- but this does not mean that an immaculate being's (God) essence is subject to change as well, because maybe He had this planned all along! Furthermore, the Aristotelian line of argument is deemed implausible, but is not exactly disproven, as there can be no assertion made with complete certainty in regards to these types of things because there likely exists no way of proving them.

Maimonides believes that the Torah's account of creation should matter to us because belief in creation, in a sense, forcefully imbues hope and promise within God's word for us -- "Know that with a belief in the creation of the world in time, all the miracles become possible and the Law becomes possible, and all questions that may be asked on this subject, vanish" (Guide 2.25). We must, almost in good faith, concede to Maimonides' conception of viewing God as bringing every part of the world into existence with His purpose in mind -- a rather deterministic and strict interpretation indeed, leaving little room for the questioning of scripture -- "He wanted it this way; or His wisdom required it this way... He brought the world into existence, having the form it has, when He wanted to, without our knowing His will with regard to this or in what respect there was wisdom in His particularizing the forms of the world and the time of its creation..." (Guide 2.25). Believing otherwise, ("in the virtue of necessity"), does not

do much justice to the word of God because we are left to question it entirely -- the entire Aristotelian doctrine of necessity poses a barrier (or even a contradiction) to the free will of God himself -- that is to say, if God exists for a stable purpose and not for his own sake and production of events, choices and commandments. The Law would therefore be nullified, because "...it would be a necessary obligation to ask all those questions; and there would be no way out of them except through a recourse to unseemly answers" (Guide 2.25). In full, the reason we need for believing in this account affirms the very need to believe in God's omnipotence at all -- placing your trust in anything other than God and his mighty will (you cannot really preordain/constrict God with something as you would by assuming an essence or nature FOR him, I bet this is blasphemy) would not really be believing in God himself, according to the Jewish conception of him, maybe -- alluding to the idea that he is perhaps omnipotent and omnipresent both. Therefore, it is best to do away with these alternative theories of creation that are logically inconsistent/strip God of his agency, according to Maimonides, if we are to put our trust in God's word.