Maimonides on the Creation of the World

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It is likely that no other topic in medieval philosophy has received more attention than creation. The prospect of still another paper on this venerable topic may well lead to suspicions that medieval Jewish philosophy has indeed fallen on hard times. Can there be anything left to say? The lines of interpretation have been firmly drawn. Even so, the subject itself is of central importance and broad interest. It merits continued reflection, and I intend to explore an angle that, to my knowledge, has not been examined.

In Ch. 25 of Part II of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides declares that we do not reject the doctrine of the eternity of the world because of passages that affirm creation, for the latter passages are no more numerous than passages affirming the corporeality of God, passages that Maimonides had spent a good bit of the Part I showing to be references to characteristics of God’s action. Nor, Maimonides continues, is it impossible or difficult to reinterpret those passages that seem to affirm creation. No, the reasons that we reject eternity are that it has not been proven and that affirming it conflicts with the whole teaching of scripture.

At first glance, Maimonides seems to be contradicting himself. He claims both that the Torah’s assertions of creation *can* be understood to be compatible with an eternal world and that to understand them this way *is to violate* a fundamental principle. If affirming eternity *is* incompatible with a fundamental principle, then the Torah’s references to creation *cannot* be interpreted as affirming eternity. However, there need not be a contradiction here. Maimonides assumes, rather, that there are two distinct standards for interpreting the Torah. First, the Torah must not conflict with what is rationally proven. In respect of this principle, the Torah can be interpreted to affirm or to deny eternity because neither has been proven. Second, the Torah must be interpreted in accordance with fundamental principles of Judaism.1 Maimonides claims that the eternity of the world would violate this second standard.
What fundamental principle would eternity contradict? Chapter 25 explains that eternity would make miracles and prophecy impossible. Maimonides means, it would seem, the sixth of the thirteen principles of faith. It is noteworthy that Chapter 25 does not say that the first principle of faith, the principle that deals specifically with creation, would be violated. Recall that that principle asserts that God exists and is the cause of existence to all beings. To bestow being on something is to make it come to be, that is, to create it. Hence, this first principle affirms that God creates all things. It would seem, then, that God’s creating all things is not denied by affirming the eternity of the world. Surprisingly, both the eternity of the world and the creation of the world are compatible with God’s creation of the world.

How can this be? How can Maimonides claim that the eternity of the world makes prophecy and miracles impossible but not, apparently, that it makes creation impossible? The obvious answer is that Maimonides has in mind two distinct doctrines of creation. One consists of the bestowal of being on all things. This could occur continuously throughout eternity—let’s call it “continuous creation.” The other doctrine is creation, as it is usually understood, the creation of heaven and earth at some single instant—let’s call it “instantaneous creation.” Only instantaneous creation is incompatible with eternity. So when Chapter 25 considers whether the world is created or eternal, it is asking about instantaneous creation, the second type of creation. It is important to realize that even if the world came to be all at once at a single instant, it would still need to be sustained in its being from moment to moment. Hence, both eternity and the traditional notion of creation presuppose continuous creation. Whether the world came about all at once or exists eternally, the world is constantly being created so as to sustain things in existence. Evidently, it is this continuous creation that is affirmed in the first principle of faith. Instantaneous creation is not itself a matter of faith, but a prerequisite of faith in prophecy and miracles.

One place where the idea of continuous creation is apparent is in Maimonides’ third proof for the existence of God (II.1). The first two proofs are arguments for an unmoved mover, and the fourth proof is an argument for a pure actuality. The third, though, is an argument for a necessary existent that would cause all else to exist. There must be such a cause, Maimonides argues, else all would have contingent,
dependent existence and at some point have ceased to exist. Clearly, if there must be a cause of existence, all that does exist depends upon this cause. And this type of causality, the bestowal of being on what is, is creation.

That being or existence must be bestowed is a fundamental tenet of medieval philosophers after Avicenna. For Aristotle an individual exists when a form comes to be present in a matter, and it is part of a thing’s nature to reproduce. However, the existence of any particular individual is accidental. Presupposing a kind of hyper-rationality, medieval thinkers sought a cause of the existence of individual composites. Since neither the form nor the matter can account for the presence or the persistence of a particular form in a particular matter, they sought a cause in the source of all being, God, that being which necessarily exists from its own nature and can, therefore, bestow being on individuals.

Creation in this sense is, thus, as necessary as the existence of God. This is why Maimonides includes creation in the first of his principles of faith: “To believe in the existence of the Creator, and this Creator is perfect in all manner of existence. He is the cause of all existence. He causes them to exist and they exist only because of Him. And if you could contemplate a case, such that He was not to exist…then all things would cease to exist and there would remain nothing.” This principle is not strictly a matter of faith because it can be demonstrated. The idea that continuous creation is a demonstrable truth is not unique to Maimonides. It is creation, in this sense, that Thomas Aquinas argues to exist necessarily, and since Aquinas does not argue for the necessity of instantaneous creation, he holds much the same view of creation as Maimonides.

Maimonides takes issue with some accounts of continuous creation, notably with those of the Mutakallimum, but there is no issue with continuous creation itself in the Guide. The issue is rather whether there is an instantaneous creation, the sort of creation that Genesis is most readily understood to advance. Here, Maimonides famously argues for the possibility of creation. He shows that the arguments against creation cannot stand, and he advances a reason to think there was an instantaneous creation, but he endorses this latter only as likely. That is to say, creation is not impossible, but neither can we say definitively that it occurred.
The reason that the arguments against creation cannot stand, Maimonides argues, is that they illegitimately project the requirements for something’s coming to be now backward to before the creation of the world. Since everything that comes to be now comes from some pre-existing matter and form, they infer that nothing could come to be from non-being. Famously, Maimonides compares this reasoning to inferring from the requirements for human life that no one could have survived an extended period without breathing air or ingesting food—just the conditions that a baby experiences.

On the other hand, Maimonides argues that there is some reason to think the cosmos has been designed and did not emerge from necessity. If the cosmos has been designed, its cause was a will and that bespeaks creation. The argument for design is complicated because it is based on astronomy or, rather, on astronomical anomalies. In particular, Maimonides argues that observations show that the center of the heavenly sphere that contains Saturn would be located beyond the sphere of the moon or, alternatively, that Saturn has epicycles around its sphere. Either way, the idea that all the spheres move around the same center, the idea that stands at the head of Aristotle’s account of the motions of the spheres, is undermined and we have to deal with solid spheres intersecting each other. Maimonides recounts other astronomical difficulties. From our perspective, evidence of anomalies in geocentric astronomy should have been a death-knell to that system, but there is simply too much evidence—both observational and theoretical—for Maimonides to consider abandoning geocentric astronomy entirely. Instead, he infers that the cosmos was designed. It has come about through an agent for a purpose. Had the cosmos come about through necessity, the causes that sustain it in its present state would be intelligible.

This is, of course, an argument from ignorance. We do not understand the order of the cosmos, and Maimonides concludes from this that it must have had a designer. Should Maimonides not have concluded that it has no design or order? Should not apparent disorder show just the opposite of what Maimonides infers? No. The central idea here is that the heavenly spheres are configured in such a way as to benefit the earth. To be sure, this is not the only reason they are so configured: we have no insight into the motives of God. The point is that if the heavens spilled over (emanated) by necessity,
the heavens could hardly serve humankind in the way that they do. How do the heaven benefit us?
Most obviously by causing annual cycle of seasonal change; and the seasons, in turn, help to generate the crops and livestock that sustains us. Without the motions of the heavens that cause these changes, there could be no life on earth.

There is another crucial role for design. When the Jews stood at the Red Sea, sandwiched between the Egyptian troops and the sea, they seemed to face certain destruction. However, the winds blew all night and in the morning, the Jews walked on dry land where the sea had been. The heavenly spheres govern the movements of the elements, Maimonides argues; there are four groups of spheres, and each group moves a distinct element. Thus, the splitting of the sea was achieved by means of the heavenly spheres. It is only if the cosmos has been designed to effect this sort of change that the spheres could have been at work to achieve the desired effect at exactly the right moment. And design presupposes creation. So it is that Maimonides needs creation to account for miracles, as he says in chapter 25. Interestingly, Maimonides thinks that God’s agency is effected by means of the natural forces at work in the physical world.5

Before examining the implications of this account further, it is necessary to defend it from a powerful objection. In his Introduction to the Guide Maimonides catalogues seven reasons why an author would intentionally introduce a contradiction into his work. A cynical reader might suppose that Maimonides intends to announce that any inconsistency the reader finds in his book is intentional and, thereby, to forestall criticism. However, it has been universally accepted that there are some intentional contradictions in the Guide. One venerable candidate is the apparent contradiction that I used to begin this paper, chapter 25’s assertions that an eternal world is compatible with the Torah’s account of creation and that it would undermine the principles of Judaism. I claimed that there was no contradiction because Maimonides draws on two distinct criteria, consonance with the truth and consistency with Judaism. Either an eternal world or a created world is consonant with truth, as we know it, because neither can be proven, but only the created world is consistent with miracles and prophecy because only a created world could be the product of design and, thereby, allow for these.
There is a powerful argument against this conclusion that depends on an intermediate position. Besides the eternity of the world he ascribes to Aristotle and the creation of the world he claims to be the position of the Torah, Maimonides describes the position of Plato according to which matter is eternal and creation consists of the form coming to be present to a matter (ch. 13 of part II). This position allows for both creation and eternity, the creation of individuals but the eternity of matter. When he initially introduces this position, he groups it with Aristotle’s eternity position; and in chapter 25, likewise, he dismisses it because it undermines miracles and prophecy. But does it? A God who imposes form on pre-existing matter thereby creating the world according to a plan with the end of sustaining an order is capable of altering that order for the sake of an end. Hence, miracles and prophecy should be possible even without creation ex nihilo. Indeed, we have an excellent example of a Jewish philosopher who maintained exactly this position, namely, Gersonides. If, then, Maimonides contradicts himself in asserting and denying that the Platonic position is consistent with Judaism, he must be hiding his true beliefs. It is natural to identify those beliefs with the Platonic view of Gersonides, as many of Maimonides’ readers have done. On this basis, it has been claimed that Maimonides rejects *ex nihilo* creation even though it appears in the Torah.

Once we allow an eternal matter, we might wonder whether form might not also be eternal. Could the miracles and prophesies have been programmed into an eternal cosmos? Could the design of the universe not itself be eternal? Indeed, would it not have to be eternal, given that God is unchanging? It might be objected that this line of thought requires that the world be determined and, thus, there is no free will. However, it need not as long as there is a connection between events and human action, as I think Maimonides must affirm. This is providence. I will return to it later.

The other esoteric view, the view that Maimonides holds the Platonic view that matter is eternal has its own difficulties. One is that, as Daniel Davies has argued, when we consider the Torah’s account of creation, we find no mention of *ex nihilo* creation but an account that is most readily understood to presuppose the existence of matter. Given this obvious reading of the Torah, it is hard to imagine what Maimonides’ motivation in concealing his endorsement of eternal matter could be. It is certainly not to
There is a more significant obstacle to accepting this esoteric reading of the *Guide*: it would alter the meaning of creation. Obviously, if matter is eternal, it is only the form that could be created, whereas if matter is not eternal, it would be created. But this contrast is too superficial. The different is more profound.

According to Aristotle and to much of the tradition after him, neither the form nor the matter is created in the generation of a composite (*Metaphysics* Z.7-8). Instead, the form that is in the father comes to present in a matter supplied by the mother or the form in the craftsman’s mind come to be in wood, marble, or some other matter. Here creation is confined to the creation of a composite. Aristotle assigns to the form the task of holding together the material parts as well as holding itself together with the matter (Z.17). As we saw earlier, this role is roundly rejected by medieval philosophers on the ground that the form cannot account for its own presence in a matter any more than it could account for its absence—indeed, for Aristotle the existence of any individual composite is accidental. For medieval thinkers, the form comes to acquire something new when it is present in a matter; it acquires being. The *existing* form is your form or my form. By nature, it is the same as any other human form, but it is particularized and instantiated by acquiring being, and it acquires being when it is present in a matter. In short, for material beings, creation is the coming into existence of a composite.

This seems to be what Maimonides means by creation. As noted, the example he uses to argue that it is a mistake to infer the conditions for coming into being from what already exists is the foetus: did we not know otherwise, we could not believe that a human being could survive without eating, drinking, breathing, and defecating. The assumption is that gestation in the mother is the process of creation of an individual. What, then, does the instantaneous creation of the cosmos mean to Maimonides? It is the coming into being at the same instant of (a) the whole cosmos along with (b) all the particular individuals within it and (c) the matter in which the cosmos and individuals exist. The cosmos is a composite individual as are the individuals it contains. If all this does come into being at
once, each composite must still be constantly sustained in its existence through instantaneous creation. The point is that creation for Maimonides is the being of a composite.

In contrast, for a Platonist, since matter is eternal, it is obviously not created in the creation of the composite. Hence, Gersonides, for example, insists that form is created when the composite is created. He means not the species form of human or mosquito, but the particular form that resides in some particular matter. This form is created in that pre-existing matter. It may seem an unwarranted subtly to distinguish between (a) creating the composite from a form and a matter and (b) creating a form in a matter, for the composite just is a form in a matter and to create a composite is to cause a form to be present in a matter. My point, though, is that for Maimonides creation is not just about getting the form into the matter, but about keeping it there, and that sustaining the composite is achieved by something other than form or matter that constitute the composite, namely existence; whereas for the Platonist creation is strictly about a particular form’s coming to be, though the place it comes to be is in a matter. The Platonist does not need anything else to sustain the form in the matter. Once the form comes to be present, it remains until another form displaces it. If, though, the form exists prior to the matter, then it might or might be present to the matter and something else is responsible for its being there and for its remaining there.

So, when Maimonides says that the cosmos might have been created, he is talking about the composite’s being created. The form of this composite cosmos as well as the forms of the individual species within the cosmos are not created on the Aristotelian account, and there is no reason to think that Maimonides would say otherwise. Inasmuch as God knows everything without ever changing, the forms of the world and all that is in it would have to be present in God’s mind eternally. If, though, this is so, then it must be the matter that is created and allows the composite to come to be. Again, when the Platonist asserts that creation had to occur, he is saying that the cosmos has a form that had to have been created, whereas when Maimonides asserts that creation might have occurred, he is saying that the matter might have come to be or might have existed eternally. The contrast here is whether the form is created or whether the composite is created by there being some sort of unity of matter and form. The composite
could be created from a pre-existent matter and a pre-existent form, as Aristotle maintains, or it could come from a pre-existent form that exists in the mind of God and a matter that is created, as Maimonides contends.

The notion that matter is created is intrinsically problematic and, indeed, unintelligible. To be created, matter would need to acquire being; but to do so, its form would have to exist eternally in the mind of God, just as any other form. If, though, this latter were the case, to acquire being would amount to matter’s acquiring its own matter somehow. If this new matter is to be, it requires still another matter, and we face regress. Hence, the creation of matter cannot be like the creation of a composite. For matter to be is for it to be in a composite, as Maimonides explains. It follows that the world could not come be from a pre-existent matter, as Plato supposes, for this would require the matter exist somehow without any form at all. That would be incoherent unless matter would have some sort of form, in which case it would not be matter. Moreover, Maimonides thinks that matter is unknowable; if matter had a form, it would be knowable, at least in principle. In short, there are good reasons to think that ex nihilo creation is a consequence of Maimonides’ understanding of creation.

Recall that continuous creation is required insofar as God needs to sustain composites from moment to moment and that continuous creation is necessary whether the universe is eternal or created. If matter is eternal and if, consequently, creation lies in the new existence of some particular form, then there is no need for continuous creation, as we saw. Thus, Gersonides, who argues for the eternity of matter, also argues against continuous creation.10

As interesting as this contrast might be, it seems beside the point, for the issue for us is instantaneous creation, that is, whether or not the cosmos is eternal or created at a moment. If the forms exist eternally in God’s mind, the eternity of the world turns on whether matter is eternal and whether or not it always has form within it. If matter is eternal, then so is the world. Since matter is unknowable in itself, Maimonides can’t really deny that it is eternal; but, for the same reason, no one can be certain that matter is eternal. So, he hesitates about eternity.
Thus, Maimonides does not think instantaneous creation can be proven, though continuous creation can be proven. Continuous creation is necessary because it consists of the bestowal of being by God, the ultimate source of being. What is problematic is whether the world comes to be all at once or existed eternally. This distinction explains why Maimonides devotes so much attention to both proving God’s existence and the unity of the world from an assumption he claims not to hold, namely, the eternity of the world. Ostensibly, Maimonides is covering all possibilities: if the world is created, then the creator, God, exists, and if the world is eternal, God must also exist. As we have seen, the creation of the world consists of the creation of matter and the coming to be of eternal forms in this matter. That these forms depend, in any case, on God, that the composite of them and matter depend on God for their existence holds whether or not the world is eternal. Indeed, the assumption that world is eternal brings out more clearly the dependence of the world on God because this dependence is continual (cf. the fifth contradiction; Pines trans. 17-18).

The eternity of the world highlights the role of continuous creation and the eternity of the forms that exist in the world, whereas the temporality of the world highlights the possibility of providence and prophecy in a world that seems to follow a regular order. If the world comes about by necessity, it would be eternal but not have a purpose, Maimonides claims. If the world does have a purpose, then it was constructed so as to achieve this purpose. He does not consider that the world might necessarily have occurred so as to achieve or forestall some purpose. Indeed, providence and prophecy do not require creation. They are compatible with an eternal universe, as I said earlier.

Why, then, does Maimonides insist on instantaneous creation? Prophecy and providence are only plausible in a world that was designed for some purpose. A created world, a world with some beginning, is more readily seen to be a world with a purpose. Earlier I spoke of Maimonides’ claim that he includes intentional contradictions in the Guide. He aims to conceal some things from the “vulgar.” I have yet to find a reader of the Guide who identifies with the vulgar. Virtually everyone supposes himself among those from whom Maimonides need not have concealed anything. Clearly, though, Maimonides writes the Guide for different audiences, but just who are the “vulgar”?
Today most scholars dismiss providence entirely and understand prophecy as a wholly natural phenomenon. Consequently, they tend to dismiss instantaneous creation. There just isn’t any need for it. On the other hand, the less thoughtful and educated often emphasize the supernatural dimension of the account. Perhaps, this is as Maimonides intends. The former group is actively committed to learning and developing their intellectual abilities. To speak to them about a supernatural dimension of prophesy and providence is to disparage their efforts. On the other hand, to say to less accomplished people that the efforts of those who develop their intellectual abilities can be rewarded disproportionately by a Divine bestowal of an intellect beyond natural intellect, that is, prophesy, or by a special protection from natural physical phenomena is to provide them with an enormous incentive to self-development.

Joseph, the person to whom the Guide is dedicated clearly belongs among the well-educated. He is put off Torah’s apparent inconsistency with Aristotelian philosophy; perhaps his issue is that the ignorant and lazy seem capable of providence and worthy of prophecy. Maimonides allows him to interpret the Guide naturalistically and to suppose that he can attain providence and prophecy through his own efforts.

Ultimately, though, Maimonides insists that there is providence and prophesy, and the created universe seems to show them. The splitting of the Sea and the giving of the Law are examples at the very core of Judaism. Instantaneous creation is valuable for those for whom it makes these examples intelligible, but dangerous for those, like Joseph, who are capable of a deeper understanding but perhaps not of the deepest understanding.

Notes


5. In contrast, Aquinas insists that God requires no physical agency.

6. See Herbert Davidson, “Maimonides' Secret Position on Creation,” Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature 1 (1979): 16-40. Unlike many others, Davidson stops short of ascribing the Platonic position to Maimonides. This article has been highly influential.

7. Daniel Davies, Method and Metaphysics, 32-34.

