Between Philosophers and Theologians: Maimonides' Response to Avicenna's Infinite World

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I. Introduction

In studies of Maimonides' philosophy, the wider Islamic context is almost universally granted. He used material from the various streams of Arabic thought as well as Jewish traditions to create an original work that has inspired Jewish philosophers ever since. Avicenna was the major representative of the movement known as *al-falāsifa*, the philosophers, a group that Maimonides identified with to a large degree. Yet the extent of Avicenna's impact on Maimonides has recently been debated.[1] Maimonides' treatment of creation in the *Guide for the Perplexed* betrays Avicenna's influence, if only in that Avicenna represents "the philosophers" that Maimonides opposes. Although Avicenna is not named, his position is essentially that which Maimonides attributes to Aristotle.[2] Whether or not the world had a beginning was "the most fundamental issue where opinions divided" at the time.[3] Like many, Maimonides locates the fundamental issue on which he disagrees with others in debates over creation. All other differences between the doctrines that he professes to hold and those that he attributes to the philosophers can be traced back to the disagreement on this particular point. Whereas the philosophers believe that the world did not begin to exist, Maimonides states that "belief in the temporal production of the world is the necessary foundation of the entire law."[4] It is therefore a particularly important disagreement, and all the more so since Maimonides fundamentally identifies with the philosophers' basic approach to the world and largely agrees with their scientific accounts of the universe and of human nature.[5] Through a discussion of Maimonides' assertion that the philosophers do not successfully demonstrate that the world cannot have begun, and his account of the nature of impossibility, this paper will explain the opinion that Maimonides presents as his own, and touch on the theological ramifications he attaches to it. His discussions are an integral part of the surrounding Islamicate culture.

II. Applying a Maimonidean principle to an Avicennan argument

The argument that is focused on in this paper can be initiated with the disjunct that time is either

eternal or it is not.[6] Maimonides says that one of these alternatives must be true, but he attempts to argue that it is impossible to know for certain which. Some of his contemporaries argued that there are demonstrative arguments that show one or the other to be true, so Maimonides needs to address these arguments. Most importantly, he needs to address the scientific arguments proposed by Aristotle, since "everything that Aristotle said about all that exists from beneath the sphere of the moon to the center of the earth is indubitably correct".[7] So Maimonides tries to limit the force of Aristotle's arguments by saying that while they are good arguments in favor of the view that time "cannot be conceived to have had a beginning",[8] they are not absolutely conclusive. In order to do so, Maimonides devises a principle which he outlines at the beginning of II:17 of the Guide and restates in the middle of the same chapter. This is the crux of his response to Aristotle from nature for an eternal world.

> In the case of everything produced in time, which is generated after not having existed, even in those cases in which the matter of the thing was already existent and in the course of the production of the thing had merely put off one and put on another form, the nature of that particular thing after it has been produced in time, has attained its final state, and achieved stability, is different from its nature when it is being generated and is beginning to pass from potentiality to actuality. It is also different from the nature the thing had before it had moved so as to pass from potentiality to actuality. ...
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> 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. Nor can an inference be drawn from the state of the thing when it moves toward being generated to its state before it begins to move thus. Whenever you err in this and draw an inference from the nature of a thing that has achieved actuality to its nature when it was only in potentia, grave doubts are aroused in you.[9]

Maimonides says that this statement is designed to oppose Aristotle's arguments that the world has always existed.[10]

As David Burrell states, and mentioned above, Maimonides' Aristotle is essentially Avicenna.[11] In the *Salvation*, Avicenna offers a pithy proof to show that time cannot be thought to have begun.

> Time is not created temporally (*ḥudūṯ zamānī*), but it is an atemporal creation (*ḥudūṯ abdā'*). Its creator precedes it neither in time nor duration, but essentially. Had it a temporal beginning, its creation would be after what was not, i.e., after a prior time, and it would be an after to a

before that does not exist simultaneously with it. It would be after a before and before an after, and it would have a before that does not itself exist when it exists [i.e. it would have a before that is non-existent when the time is created]. Nothing like this is the first before, and whatever is not the first before is not a beginning (*mabda'*) of the whole of time. So time is an atemporal creation, i.e., only its creator (*bārī*) precedes it.

The meaning of temporally created is that it was not, then it was. And the meaning of "was not" is that there was a state in which it was nonexistent, and this state is a state of affairs that exists and is delineated. Now, [when used in reference to time], the meaning of "was not" is nonexistence, not at a specified past time, but rather nonexistent in relation to non-being. The prior-existent is also not itself an existent in the non-being; moreover, it does not exist in many of the existents, such as motion, transformation, and change. It is not that it does not exist in a thing, nor that it does not exist as one thing, just as it does not mean that it is not in a thing and that it is not one thing. So time is not temporally created.[12)]

This is the kind of argument that Maimonides' principle is designed to question. It is helpful to read it in light of the following quotation from Avicenna's *Book of Definitions*.

Priority (*qidam*) is said in a number of ways. [Something] is called prior in relation and prior absolutely. The relatively prior is a thing which is further back in time than another thing; it [the first] is prior relative to it [the second]. Absolute priority is also said in two ways. It is said in consideration of time and in consideration of essence. As for that which is in consideration of time, it is the thing that exists in a limitless past time. The prior in consideration of essence is the thing that has no principles (*mabādi'*) necessitating the existence of its essence. The prior in consideration of time is that which has no temporal beginning and the prior in consideration of essence is that which does not depend on any principle. It is the true one, far exalted over the sayings of the ignorant.[13)]

Here Avicenna distinguishes three ways in which we use the word 'prior'. The first is a basic concept of physics, and Maimonides agrees with this definition. The basic way we understand the word prior is relatively. One thing is prior to another in time. Avicenna offers a number of arguments to show that because of the way we understand the word 'prior', it follows that time itself must be absolutely prior. The disagreement lies in the second sense of prior, and in the connection between the first and second. In the argument that Avicenna offered above, he uses our understanding of relative priority to show that there must be absolute temporal priority. He says that there cannot have

been a first moment. Every 'before' must have another 'before'. This conclusion relies on his definition of an instant.

> Definition 31: The moment is an extremity [instinctively understood] by the estimative faculty (*ṭaraf mawhūm*), in which future and past times share. And 'moment' is said of a short period of time in the estimative faculty, generically united with the real moment.[14)]

The *Book of Definitions* serves a useful illustrative purpose. Maimonides' principle challenges any attempt to apply these kinds of definitions to the origination of the world. He argues that it is improper to take the definition of a relative kind of priority and conclude that there must also be the temporal kind of absolute priority. He would agree that every moment, inasmuch as it is something understood, must have a before. No moment can ever be first, because a moment is defined as a limit of what is before and after. But the definition of a moment cannot apply to the notion of an absolute beginning. So, if such an absolute beginning is posited, it does not satisfy the definition of a moment and is therefore not a moment. In that case, the definition of a moment cannot be applied to an absolute beginning in order to rule out its possibility. Therefore, it is not the case that an absolute beginning would not be the 'first before' for the reason that, by definition, any before would have another before and therefore could not be first. It does not satisfy such a definition so cannot be ruled out by that definition. As the principle states, it is incorrect to use an account of the world as it now is and apply it to the creation of the world as a whole.[15)]

Maimonides offers an analogy to illustrate the principle. Imagine a child who has grown up isolated on an island, brought up only by a single father. Once mature, the child asks his father how they came to exist and is told that people grow inside the belly of a woman. The child asks, when inside a belly, does a person eat, drink, and breath? When answered 'no', the child does not believe the story because it opposes all of his previous experience. He knows that if someone eats and drinks nothing that person will not survive. It seems clear that Maimonides' principle does indeed apply to the analogy. The child has certain experience of the way in which people function once they are fully formed. He ought not to assume that they function in the same way before they are fully formed. However, the reason the principle applies here is that there is a time before they were formed, and that stretch of time is something that we have experience of. In the case of the world, Maimonides states that there was no time at all before creation. There was no before, but time was created along with the existing beings: "the world was not created in a temporal beginning (*lam yuḥlaq fī mabdā'i zamānī*), as we have explained since time belongs to the created things".[16)] Jonathan Malino has argued that the principle therefore cannot apply to creation, and that Maimonides never seriously

intends to use it in order to refute Aristotle.[17] On this view, he cannot have done so because he relies on the very language and ideas that he attempts to refute.

Later, Maimonides repeats the principle, writing as follows:

> We the community of the followers of Moses our Master and Abraham our Father, may peace be on them, believe that the world was generated in such and such manner and came to be in a certain state from another state. Aristotle, on the other hand, begins to contradict us and to bring forward against us proofs based on the nature of what exists, a nature that has attained stability, is perfect, and has achieved actuality. As for us, we declare against him that this nature, after it has achieved stability and perfection, does not resemble in anything the state it was in while in the state of being generated, and that it was brought into existence from absolute nonexistence.[18]

The expressions here are similar to those that Avicenna uses in the above argument, which may again raise the suspicion that Maimonides is unable to free himself from Avicenna's definitions. Avicenna stated that "the meaning of 'was not' is that it was a state in which it was lacking. This state is a thing that exists and is delineated." This refers to a situation in which a thing is generated from something else. In both states, the state in which the thing was lacking and the later state in which the thing exists, there is an existing thing. The thing that is generated does not exist in the prior state, but it begins to exist when the previously existing thing is altered and changes into it. So, as Maimonides says, the world came to be "in a certain state from another state", and the previous state was, in Avicenna's words, "a thing that exists and is delineated."

In order for the principle to be used in defense of creation, as Alfred Ivry points out, "Maimonides must be aware that he cannot be using the word 'after' in the normal, temporal sense."[19] As mentioned above, however, he can use it properly as an explanation of the analogy that he offers in order to explain his point. As in the case of the child on an Island, there is no way to draw an inference from his current experience to the way in which he was brought into existence, so for the world as well, considering its present nature does not help explain the world's coming into being. What this means is that there can be no way for humans to have scientific knowledge about the creation of the world as a whole. Definitions and concepts that hold good for the present state of the universe do not avail any knowledge of creation.

Maimonides is therefore saying that a definition of priority, or the notion of a 'before', cannot be used to rule out an absolute beginning of the world. If an absolute beginning is posited, that beginning would not satisfy the definition of a moment needed in order to have priority in the first place.

Therefore, the definition of priority, or of a moment, simply does not apply. Maimonides does not explain what it would mean for there to be an absolute beginning, but says that arguments purporting to show that there cannot have been overstretch their use of words. They apply definitions used to explain something about the world to something that cannot be understood. It is important that Maimonides does not try to explain what an absolute beginning might be. A moment must have a before, inasmuch as it is understood, but an absolute beginning is not understood, and nor is creation.

III. The modality of creation

If creation ex nihilo cannot be understood, there might be a case for saying that it is impossible. Ivry offered an alternative interpretation in an earlier essay, which clarifies the difficulty that Maimonides now faces. He argued that an absolute beginning, creation from nothing, is akin to a square circle and is therefore a logical impossibility. In the same way as a square circle has no meaning, creation from nothing has no meaning because 'something' and 'nothing' are as different from one another as 'square' and 'circle'. Maimonides cannot have understood creation from nothing to be creation at an absolute first moment. "The notions are logical impossibilities because they are self-contradictory concepts, and as such meaningless assertions."[20] However, the two cases are not the same. In the case of a square circle, we know what a square is and we know what a circle is. Even if they are in the external world, they are both human concepts and can be contrasted. Putting together two distinct concepts in the same category is indeed meaningless as asserting one involves denying the other. But in the case of something from nothing, that is not what happens. We do not have any concept of absolutely nothing so the way in which it opposes "something", if at all, differs from the way in which a square opposes a circle. Creation ex nihilo cannot be impossible in the same way as a square circle is impossible. This raises the question of why creation might be considered impossible.

Maimonides considers different modalities when he discusses questions related to creation in the third part of the *Guide*. He states that "according to every opinion and school there are impossible things whose existence cannot be admitted." It can be demonstrated that such things do not exist so "power to bring them about cannot be ascribed to the deity."[21] Maimonides includes the following in the class that all agree are impossible: "the coming together of contraries at the same instant and at the same place and the transmutation of substances, I mean the transformation of a substance into an accident and of an accident into a substance, or the existence of a corporeal substance without their

being an accident in it. All of these belong to the class of the impossible according to all men of speculation." The chapter ends with Maimonides explaining that "the point with regard to which there is disagreement concerns the things that could be supposed to belong to either of the two classes—whether they belong to the class of the possible or to the class of the impossible."[22)]

It is important to consider to which of the categories creation belongs. Whereas Maimonides has tried to argue that it is not in the class of the impossible, and it is therefore something about which there can be a disagreement, the philosophers argue that it is no less impossible than the above mentioned square circle: "the bringing into being of a corporeal thing out of no matter whatsoever belongs, according to us, to the class of the possible, and to the class of the impossible according to the philosophers. The philosophers say similarly that to bring into being a square whose diagonal is equal to one of its sides or a corporeal angle encompassed by four plane right angles and other similar things belong all of them to the class of the impossible."[23)] In Maimonides' presentation, then, the philosophers consider creation from absolutely nothing to be a logical impossibility. Since such things are impossible, creation is impossible.

Maimonides must therefore argue that the philosophers are mistaken to include creation in the class of logical impossibilities: they are wrong to compare creation to a square circle. Yet there are other kinds of impossibility besides that of a square circle's existence. Maimonides says that an animal with a thousand eyes is impossible, as it is merely a product of the imagination rather than a conception abstracted from external reality, as is the existence of a person whose feet are on the ground but whose head is in the heavens, even though the latter resembles an accepted English metaphor.[24)] Perhaps an animal could have a thousand eyes, so this example does not seem to be a logical impossibility unless the qualification that animals do not have a thousand eyes is added. Other impossibilities that can be imagined could be considered logical impossibilities. It is impossible, for example, that the flower on my windowsill is currently looking out of the window, even though it could be depicted to be doing exactly that. Flowers might look out of windows in cartoons. The reason that this is impossible is that looking is not the kind of activity that flowers undertake, so the combination of the two is nonsense even if it can be imagined. Given that the object in question is a flower, and flowers do not see, sight cannot be predicated of it. This example illustrates that the range of predicates that can be sensibly applied to any subject depends on the kind of thing it is. The subject's form is restrictive, as well as being that which actualizes the thing, since a particular form excludes certain kinds of properties. A thing cannot be both a flower and a human being, unless one of the two is given a metaphorical meaning, so attributing the form of flower to a particular lump of matter excludes the form of human from that same matter. Like denying that a

square is a circle, affirming that a thing is a flower involves denying that it is a human, a horse, a piece of cheese, or any other non-floral substance.[25] As mentioned, it also excludes properties that could sensibly be ascribed to humans but not to flowers. This exclusion of accidental properties is a relative sort of impossibility, which depends on the kind of substance that the accidents are assigned to, rather than an absolute impossibility. Neither the subject, nor the predicate are impossible in themselves, but they are impossible in combination: given that a thing is a flower, it cannot see. The impossibility here is different from that of predicating a color of a square circle, because in the latter case the subject has no meaning, whereas the former case involves attributing a property that the subject cannot possess.

These kinds of impossibilities are relative kinds. The activity of seeing is impossible only in relation to the subject it is predicated of, if that subject is not the kind of thing that has sight or blindness predicated of it, but the activity is not impossible in itself. The conceptions (*taṣawwurāt*) "flower" and "sight" are intelligible, unlike squares with diagonals equal to one of their sides, but their combination (*tarkīb*) is impossible so it cannot be acknowledged to be true (*muṣādaqa*).[26] Maimonides would agree with the philosophers that, like the impossible squares, no-one can deny that combinations of such things are also impossible, except those who "know only the words by themselves and do not conceive their notion."

Impossibilities of generation are also relative. Maimonides argues that the philosophers illegitimately liken the creation of the world as a whole to change that takes place within the world.[27] So the kind of impossibility under which the philosophers class creation is connected to impossibilities of change. If creation from no matter is thought of in these terms, the philosophers would be right to consider it an impossibility. Such impossibilities are relative because they depend on the forms involved in the process. Creation is most obviously compared to generation. In the case of natural generation of living beings, the form limits the kind of offspring that the subject can produce. A flower generates a flower rather than a horse because a thing generates other things like itself. As Maimonides states, "any thing at random does not proceed from any other thing at random, but there subsists necessarily a certain conformity between the cause and its effect."[28] This reflects the principle that form is active, and causes matter, which is passive, to take on form. Not all changes in substance must be in the category of generation, however. Material substrates themselves tend to change the form that they possess. As Maimonides states, "the nature and true reality of matter are such that it never ceases to be joined to privation; hence no form remains constantly in it, for it perpetually puts off one form and takes on another."[29] In these cases too, the form limits the kind of thing that the matter can turn into. Even though matter itself is ultimately potentially all things, a

particular lump of matter that is presently informed by the essence of a flower cannot be turned into an airplane. The flower's matter is not the kind of matter that can be made into glass or metal, unless it undergoes many other changes first. It cannot become glass because the form that the flower's matter has prevents it from becoming glass. Instead, a decaying flower would become compost. In all kinds of transformation of matter, whether the subject is the cause of the change or its recipient, the potential change is limited by the form that the matter possesses.

Such an explanation of change and generation appears to reinforce the view that creation is impossible. As explained above, the impossibility of creation is derived from the notion that any sort of beginning requires there to have been an existence prior to the beginning thing. If there is no such existence, there is then no potential for a new beginning. Because there is no potentiality in nothing, there is no way that any change or generation can take place. In that case, there could be generation from pre-existing matter of some sort, a position that Maimonides attributes to Plato.[30] However, generation from nothing at all could not take place because it simply does not make sense. For example, flowers come from seeds, which come from other flowers and so on. Flowers do not spring up spontaneously. So the philosophers argue that creation from no matter at all is impossible, and makes as much sense as a horse being generated by a flower.

Burrell explains that Avicenna was "unable to conceive a creation in which nothing at all was presupposed."[31] This is the root of Maimonides' quarrel with the philosophers and it is the reason why the philosophers' account of God's creation is characterized as necessary: "Just as one does not ask with regard to God why God exists and how God exists thus, I mean one and incorporeal, so it may not be asked with regard to the world as a whole why it exists or how it exists thus. For all this, both the cause and the effect, exist thus necessarily, and nonexistence is not possible with regard to them in any respect nor their changing from the way they exist." (II:19, 303) It seems that if creation is to come about from absolutely nothing, this event would be unintelligible, and also unimaginable. Maimonides therefore needs to support his claim that the philosophers are acting illegitimately when they try to use their ideas about generation of things in the world and apply it to the generation of the world as a whole. In order to do so, he argues that they have not successfully shown that creation is impossible in itself. They focus on the fact that it is impossible for something to come about from no matter whatsoever, because without matter there is no potential. But if time and matter must be presupposed, form must also be presupposed, even if in only a limited way. Maimonides could have been able to emphasize the fact that in nothing there is also no form. If there is no form, there are no obstructions or restrictions of the sort that form imposes. Matter provides the potential, but it is only through knowing the form of the thing that we know that a particular generation is impossible, as

that generation would be prevented by the form. Without form, then, one cannot know how it would be impossible for creation to take place. So nothing does not prevent something from being generated "from itself" in the same way as the form of a flower prevents the form of a horse from being generated from the flower. The kind of generation that takes place in the world, which is limited by the existence of form, is therefore not applicable to the generation of the world as a whole from absolutely nothing as the latter is not limited by form.

IV. A corollary of creation: miracles and the disagreement over God's knowledge

It is worth stressing that the arguments discussed so far constitute an attempt to refute the philosophers' claim that creation from absolutely nothing is impossible. This is quite different from arguing that it is genuinely possible. The preceding examination does not show that creation is possible, simply that the particular arguments used have not demonstrated otherwise. Creation might indeed be impossible, but it has not been shown to be so.[32] It is therefore necessary to examine what must be the case if creation is to be possible, which will lead below to further consideration of the theological ramifications of a belief in creation.

To reiterate, matter is pure potentiality so cannot exist without some form.[33] If there is some form, any production is limited to a certain degree. This has consequences for the law's view about God's agency because form limits the ability of an agent to mold the patient. Therefore, only if absolutely nothing is presupposed can the creator be said to be able to carry out exactly what is willed and chosen. The law's view, that nothing is presupposed, therefore requires a God who creates through will (*irāda*) and purpose (*qaṣd*). It would require a God who is absolutely free to choose (*ikhtār*) to create without restrictions imposed by the need for matter or the existence of form. God must be the absolute originator of both matter and form. Furthermore, Maimonides argues that the law's view involves the claim that creation must be a result of God's creative knowledge as well as God's will. Similar to the disagreements over creation, Maimonides presents the law's doctrines about God's knowledge as opposed to the philosophers' beliefs, neither of which can be demonstrated, and he further counsels to connect the "method used by us with regard to this question" to all doctrines concerning which there is no demonstration: "no demonstrations at all can be obtained with regard to these great and sublime notions, neither for our opinion ... nor for the opinion of the philosophers ... . And with regard to all problems with reference to which there is no demonstration, the method used by us with regard to this question, I mean the question of the deity's knowledge of what is other than God, ought to be followed".[34]

The method mentioned in this quotation is to insist that God's knowledge is creative, which allows Maimonides to assert that God knows all particulars and also to maintain that the word "knowledge" can only be used of God and of humans by way of absolute equivocation, like other divine attributes.[35] There is a reversal of emphasis in the way that Maimonides depicts the two kinds of knowledge, which maintains and emphasizes the difference between God's knowledge and human knowledge.[36] In the case of humans, speculative knowledge is the loftiest kind of knowledge, and is superior to practical knowledge as it encompasses more things. It is concerned with universals and generalities, whereas practical knowledge is concerned with particulars. Practical knowledge is therefore limited. Humans are not said truly to know particulars, as the intellect deals with ideas divested of matter, for it is itself immaterial. Particular things are instead apprehended through the senses. However, there is also a sense in which speculative knowledge might be less valuable than practical knowledge, despite its inherent superiority. A scientist might know everything there is to know about flowers without knowing that the particular flower on my windowsill exists. Practical knowledge, however, allows for engagement with particular things. Because it concerns particulars, practical knowledge can be productive, resulting in fashioning things, whereas speculative knowledge is purely abstract. God's knowledge is productive, but the limitations of speculative knowledge cannot apply to God's knowledge, because God's knowledge is the cause of matter, so it can apply to particulars as well. The fact that matter is unintelligible to people, because it is unintelligible in its very nature, does not prevent it from being intelligible to God, because God's knowledge is not derived. Rather, because God's knowledge is the cause of matter, and of material particulars, God knows particulars. Again, this requires that there be nothing at all in common between God's knowledge and human knowledge.

The law's account of creative divine knowledge allows for the possibility of miracles, because miracles happen to individual things, not to generalities.[37] If God knows only universals, as the philosophers claim, God's causality extends to universals. It extends to the individuals only in as much as they are subsumed under the universals. On such a view, matter is unknown, and the material particulars are unknown, so all material particulars must follow the universal rules. This opinion accords with the philosophers' belief in an eternal world which, according to Maimonides, is not freely created by God, and does not allow for such possibilities because what is possible is restricted by the particular things to which possible events might occur. If matter and form are presupposed to creation, God would be restricted by them because all activity is restricted by what is acted on. If nothing restrictive is acted on, and creation is out of absolute nonexistence, God's activity is not restricted. God's absolute freedom from matter and form would enable God's creative

knowledge to extend to all particulars, and that in turn would allow for miracles. If individual things are created by God only according to a universal pattern, there cannot be anomalies that would count as miracles. However, if God's creative knowledge extends also to material things in themselves, the individuals could in principle be created in different ways, in ways that might not always accord with the universal rules that are accessible to human knowledge.[38] Therefore, the law's view of God's knowledge allows for the possibility of miracles.

Furthermore, viewing God's knowledge as creative expresses the idea that God does not create out of necessity, or because that is what God's nature requires, but through knowledge and intent. Whereas all created things must of necessity possess certain properties, God possesses no property that is distinguishable from the divine existence. In similar terms to those explained above, one might say that if something is a plant, it must possess the capacity for growth, or that if something is a human it must possess the capacity for language. Nothing similar could be said of God. Positing God's existence does not in itself involve saying that God must be creator. Importantly for present purposes, it also indicates that the various doctrines espoused by the law are connected all with each other. If creation from absolutely nothing requires a free creator who produces matter and form, and is not restricted by prior potentiality of any sort, the possibility of the law's central teachings follow from accepting the law's view of creation and its consequences for God's will. Maimonides lists these teachings in II:25:

> 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. Thus it might be said: why did God give prophetic revelation to this one and not to that? What did God give this law to this particular nation, and did not legislate to others? Why did God impose these commandments and these prohibitions? Why did God privilege the prophet with the miracles mentioned in relation to him and not with some others? What was God's aim in giving this law? Why did God not, if such was God's purpose, put the accomplishment of the commandments and the nontransgression of the prohibitions of the commandments into our nature? If this were said, the answer to all these questions would be that it would be said "God wanted it this way, or God's wisdom required it this way. And just as God brought the world into existence having the form it has, when God wanted to without our knowing God's will with regard to this or in what respect there was wisdom in God's particularizing the forms of the world and the time of its creation, in the same way we do not know God's will or the exigency of God's wisdom that caused all the matters, about which questions have been posed above, to be particularized." ... Everything is bound up with this problem.[39]

All of the doctrines form a matrix of interconnected beliefs, along with the law's teaching of creation and God's knowledge, that construct a coherent set of views, the truth of one of which implies the truth of the others. As Charles Manekin states, "the only philosophical difficulty arising from Maimonides' new interpretation of miracles and miraculous providence mentioned in the Guide is the one that he poses in the name of the Aristotelians with respect to creation, the problem of God's will changing. The answer he gives to the Aristotelians there is equally valid here; God can will something one day and not will that thing the other day without this constituting a change in the divine essence, or even a change in the divine will, although it does require novel will."[40)]

In II:25, Maimonides is concerned to explain that were either view of creation scientifically certain to be true, had either been demonstrated, that view must be accepted.[41)] However, if a belief cannot be demonstrated to be either true or false, and that belief has theological consequences, those consequences ought to be taken into account when favoring one of the two positions over the other.[42)] This discussion is clearly connected with III:15, in which Maimonides argues that science cannot prove one or the other of the two views of creation to be impossible. Additionally, the preceding chapter in the *Guide*, III:14, ends with the following statement, which echoes sentiments in II:25. "Whenever it is possible to interpret the words of an individual in such a manner that they conform to a being whose existence has been demonstrated, this is the conduct that is most fitting and suitable for an equitable man of excellent nature."[43)] The connection between III:14 and III:15 is creation. Maimonides argues that creation has not been shown to be impossible, so eternity has not been demonstrated, and it is not necessarily fitting to interpret the law to teach eternity. The discussion in part three belongs to Maimonides' account of the differences between the philosophers' opinions on crucial theological issues and those of the Mosaic law.[44)]

Manekin further explains that "Maimonides' perplexity is a direct consequence of his deviation from Aristotle on the question of creation and of miracles. Maimonides may perceive here the difficulty of reconciling Aristotelian modal notions and principles with those implied by his theological stance. For once Maimonides has taken his stand with the creationists—in the sense in which he wishes to understand creation—he can no longer rely on intellect—in the sense in which he once viewed intellect—as a criterion for determining the possible."[45)] To a limited degree, Maimonides has thrown in his lot with the theologians, even though he is critical of their methods.[46)] His extended critique appears in part one of the *Guide*, and a comment explaining their motivations is relevant here. He states that what motives the theologians is the need to refute the claim that the world had no beginning.[47)] Despite their noble aim, Maimonides refuses to accept their methods for a variety of reasons, including their belief that the imagination is a capable arbiter

of possibility.[48] He therefore states in III:15 that "those who assert that an accident may exist without a substrate are not led to this affirmation by speculation alone, but wished thereby to safeguard certain doctrines (*umūr*) of the law that are placed under great pressure (*zāḥimahā al-naẓar mazāḥimatan shadīdatan*)[49] by speculation; thus the assertion in question was a way out for them." Maimonides then draws a similarity between this attempt to safeguard the law and his own "way out", which is his belief in creation from absolute non-being. The relevant difference between the two positions for the purposes of III:15 is the methods they use to establish what is possible and what is impossible. On this point, Maimonides sides with the philosophers, who consider the intellect to be the arbiter.

However, Maimonides argues that the case of creation differs from all others, and neither imagination nor intellect are capable of depicting an absolute beginning or deciding whether or not it is impossible. Once more, while the Kalām thinkers use their imaginations as the arbiter of what is possible, and therefore declare that creation is possible, the philosophers use intellect, and therefore declare creation impossible. In III:15 Maimonides poses a sequence of questions that seem to indicate that neither are capable of deciding the particular issue of creation.

> Would that I knew whether this gate is open and licit, so that everyone can claim and assert with regard to any notion whatsoever that he conceives: this is possible; whereas someone else says: no, this is impossible because of the nature of the matter. ... Should this be verified and examined with the help of the imaginative faculty or with the intellect? And by what can one differentiate between that which is imagined and that which is cognized by the intellect?

Creation from absolutely nothing at all can be neither truly conceptualized nor properly imagined, and since neither reason nor imagination are capable of declaring it to be true or false, or the alternative to be true or false, neither can be used to establish or refute creation.

If miracles are bound up with creation, the question arises over whether intellect can rule that they are impossible. If so, their impossibility would be evidence for the impossibility of creation from nothing. A complete discussion of the nature of miracles is beyond the scope of the present paper, but it is worth considering them in light of the above explanation of relative impossibility. There is a question about how far such relative impossibility extends. Al-Ghazālī offers a useful example. He pictures a dead human body in a seated position moving its hand in such a way as to write in an ordered fashion. Such a thing is possible, says Ghazālī. Certainly, it would be possible for a dead body to be placed in a chair, have a pen put in its hand, and its arm moved in such a way as to write an entire manuscript. The corpse could be made to do this by an external agent. However, the corpse

could not be said to know what it is doing, or being made to do, because knowledge cannot be ascribed to an inanimate being. Whereas the body of a dead person can move, a corpse by its very nature is inanimate and therefore does not know because knowledge is a property that can only be attributed to a living being. To say that a corpse knows would be like saying that a flower looks through a window. Ghazālī argues that God could bring about such an event without the intermediary of any created agent, since it is possible in itself.

However, observing that something makes sense is not the same as saying that it is possible that such a thing come about with no cause. It is nonsense to say that the corpse knows what it is writing, as it is nonsense to say that the flower is teasing the cat with its arms, whereas it might not be nonsense to say that the corpse's hand is producing a written manuscript without the aid of a created agent. Nevertheless, such an activity could still be impossible, given certain qualifications. After all, Maimonides argues that the imagination is unable to distinguish true from false, and is capable of envisaging impossibilities, as mentioned above. That one could imagine a corpse writing does not make such an event possible. But the dead scribe can be distinguished from Maimonides' own examples of impossibilities composed by the imagination. Maimonides' examples differ from Ghazālī's because the writing corpse concerns the nature of causality rather than the question of whether a certain concept is possible. What is important for Maimonides is that for events to take place exactly as God wills, and for that to mean that God could "lengthen a fly's wing,"[50] God's causal knowledge must extend to all particulars. For God to be able to will one particular at one time and another at another time, those particulars must be objects of God's will and knowledge and God must be the cause of each.[51]

One of the challenges that this leaves the reader is that she must work out how it can be that changing things are objects of God's will while God's will does not change. Maimonides repeatedly states that God is unchanging and also argues that God is not bound by time.[52] However, he does not enter into details to explain how it is possible for God's will to be different on different days without God's will changing. For God to have novel will without changing, God must be related to individuals that change through time, and the relationships between God and individuals must be different at different points in time.[53] However, those changes in relationship must not imply change in God but in the things on the other sides of the relations. For example, a table might be on my left at one point in time and on my right at a later point. However, this change in relationship might not indicate any change on the part of the table's position. I may simply have turned round. The relation between me and the table would therefore have changed without any change at all taking place in the table. Similarly, God's relations to changing things must be able to change, in such a way that God

can be said at different times to be willing different things, without that change in relationship indicating any change in God's will. Although God does not change, God must be related to things that do change.[54]

Even though Maimonides does not explain such a relationship in detail, he offers a Talmudic analogy that is open to this reading. The purpose of the analogy, in Maimonides' explanation, is to show that all things were created together at one instant, and to explain how the account of creation presented at the beginning of Genesis can be depicted in days, even though there was then no way to measure time: "inasmuch as a rotating sphere and a sun did not yet exist, whereby was 'the first day' measured?"[55] Given that time depends on the existence of motion, which in turn depends on the existence of the heavens, and given that the heavens seem not to be created first in the Genesis story, how could the first day have elapsed as the story suggests. Maimonides offers this analogy to explain that the development of the story is not to be taken literally. There was no temporal progression in the act of creation. "Accordingly, everything was created simultaneously; then gradually all things became differentiated. They have compared this to what happens when an agricultural laborer sows various kinds of grain in the soil at the same moment. Some of them sprout within a day, others within two days, others again within three days, though everything was sowed at the same hour."[56] If this analogy can be used to cover God's relationship to creation as a whole, along with the creation story in Genesis, it would provide a way to picture God's novel will. Admittedly, a distinction might be drawn between the initial creation of the world, as something that occurred at the beginning of time, and the continuing creation of the world, in which God conserves the whole of existence.[57] The farmer analogy applies to the initial moment because it teaches that everything was created at a single moment, and therefore indicates that the biblical text does not provide a literal, temporal account. However, that should not prevent the analogy from applying to the conservation aspect of creation as well. As the gradual change in the crop indicates no change in the farmer, the changes in created things indicate no change in God. Instead, the change is all in the things created.[58] This idea, together with Maimonides' endorsement of the image that God's knowledge is creative, similar to that of an artisan, contains the seeds of a way to think about God's novel will, and to argue that God can know and will changing particulars without God's knowledge and will changing itself.[59]

V. Concluding précis

The law's view involves a certain level of humility, accepting the position of humans in the world, their inability to know certain matters, and even, perhaps, limiting the certainty of what they do

know. Maimonides' attempts to argue for the law represent an engagement both with the Islamic philosophers and the theologians. He attempts to pursue a position that is theologically acceptable without descending into the absurdity peddled by the theologians, who rely on the imagination to judge what can be true or false. He does so by limiting the role of the intellect as well as that of the imagination. Demonstrations are unavailable in certain areas of inquiry, such as creation, and even in those areas that can be investigated by science, Maimonides introduces a certain level of uncertainty. Scientific knowledge is speculative and universal, and it extends to all particulars inasmuch as they are subsumed under the general. Maimonides' position is that the philosophers make too great a claim for human reason, as they argue that human knowledge, inasmuch as it extends only to generalities, encompasses therein all particulars. If miracles are possible, and they do not conform to universal rules but are intended by God, there are possibilities that are not available to reason. Human knowledge is therefore limited by the belief in miracles because it introduces lack of certainty that scientific knowledge extends to every particular. Ultimately, the law's opinion is theocentric. It relies on the belief that God creates because it is God's will to do so, and considers everything that occurs to be a result of God's will. Everything depends on God rather than on chance, and this encourages awareness of God as purposive creator of all things. Rather than agreeing wholeheartedly with the theologians or the philosophers, Maimonides points out problems with positions adopted by both schools. In doing so he challenges his readers to think the questions through for themselves.

Notes

1) Maimonides says that Avicenna's works are useful and worth studying. Alexander Marx, "Texts by and about Maimonides," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 25 (1935), 180. Mauro Zonta argues that Maimonides did not think that they should be examined in depth, 'Maimonides' Knowledge of Avicenna: Some Tentative Conclusions About a Debated Question,' in Georges Tamer (ed.), *The Trias of Maimonides / Die Trias des Maimonides* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005). For further on reading Maimonides in his Islamicate context, see Sarah Stroumsa, *Maimonides in his World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).
2) David B. Burrell, *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (Notre Dame: UNDP, 1993), 9.
3) Herbert Davidson, *Proof for Eternity, Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 1.
4) Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, translated by Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), II:27, 332.
5) The philosophers do not all agree about all points, of course, but Maimonides is rarely concerned

to agree with one of them rather than another. Consequently, the secondary literature includes numerous studies and disagreements over whom he followed on a given point. For example, see Barry Kogan's treatment of Maimonides' epistemology, " "What can we Know and When Can We Know It?" Maimonides on the Active Intelligence and Human Cognition," in Eric Ormsby (ed.), *Moses Maimonides and his Time* (Washington D.C.: CUA Press, 1989), 121–137.

6) *Guide* I:71, 181.
7) *Guide* II:22, 319.
8) *Guide* II:30, 349.
9) *Guide* II:17, 294–295.
10) For an extensive explanation of Maimonides' account of creation and his various arguments see Kenneth Seeskin, *Maimonides on the Origin of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). He explains the logic of Maimonides' response to Aristotle on pp. 60–95. Seeskin's interpretation is supported in this paper.
11) Above note 2. For an example see *Guide* II:22, in which the system of intelligences assigned to Aristotle owes much to Avicenna's arguments. See Arthur Hyman, "From What is One and Simple only What is One and Simple Can Come to Be," in Goodman (ed.), *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 111–135.
12) Avicenna, *Kitāb al-Najāt* (Beirut: Dār al-Afāq al-Jadīda, 1985), 104.
13) Avicenna, *Kitāb al-Ḥudūd* Goichon (ed.), (Cairo: Publications de L'Institut Français D'Archéologie Orientale du Caire, 1963), 44.
14) Avicenn, *Kitāb al-Ḥudūd*: 35.
15) Seeskin, *Origin*: 71.
16) *Guide* II:30, 349.
17) Jonathan Malino, 'Aristotle on Eternity: Does Maimonides Have a Reply?' in Pines and Yovel (eds.), *Maimonides and Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1986), 52–64.
18) *Guide* II:17, 296.
19) Alfred Ivry, 'The Logical and Scientific Premises of Maimonides' Thought," in Ivry, Wolfson, and Arkush (eds.), *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism* (Newark: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1989).
20) Alfred Ivry, "Maimonides on Creation", in Novak and Samuelson (eds.), *Creation and the End of Days: Judaism and Scientific Cosmology* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986). Ivry seems to adopt a different position, which is closer to that argued here, in the later article, mentioned in the previous note.
21) *Guide* II:15, 459.
22) *Guide* III:15, 461.
23) *Guide* II:15, 460.
24) "Eight Chapters", translated in Isadore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader* (Springfield NJ: Behrman House Inc., 1972), 364.
25) Maimonides famously employs a similar tactic when he suggests that denying an increasing

number of attributes of a thing leads to growing knowledge of that thing. *Guide* I:60, 144.

26) These terms are explained in Harry Wolfson, "The terms Taṣawwur and Taṣdīq in Arabic Philosophy and their Greek, Latin and Hebrew Equivalents," *The Moslem World* 33 (1943), 1–15.
27) Seeskin, *Origin*, 69.
28) *Guide* II:22, 317.
29) *Guide* III:8, 431.
30) Seeskin, *Origin*, 35–59.
31) Burrell, *Freedom and Creation*, 43.
32) This is the case even though Maimonides offers other arguments designed to show that creation is more likely to be true than eternity, all things considered. He is only able to do so after establishing that creation has not been shown to be impossible.
33) *Guide* III:8, 431.
34) *Guide* III:21, 485.
35) See Charles Manekin, "Belief, Certainty, and Divine Attributes in the *Guide of the Perplexed*," *Maimonidean Studies* 1 (1990), 117–141.
36) Burrell, *Freedom and Creation*, 58–59.
37) For Maimonides' understanding of miracles, see Hannah Kasher, "Biblical Miracles and the Universality of Natural Laws: Maimonides' Three Methods of Harmonization," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 8 (1999), 25–52.
38) Tzvi Langermann explains that Maimonides' belief in miracles is an expression of his belief in the limits of the human intellect: "Maimonides and Miracles: The growth of a (dis)belief," *Jewish History* 18 (2004), 147–172.
39) *Guide* II:25, 329–330.
40) Charles Manekin, "Divine Will in Maimonides' Later Writings," *Maimonidean Studies* 5 (2008), 207.
41) For the philosophical background of the connection between demonstrations and certainty, see Charles Manekin, "Maimonides and the Arabic Aristotelian Tradition of Epistemology," in Friedenreich and Goldstein (eds.), *Beyond Religious Borders: Interaction and Intellectual Exchange in the Medieval Islamic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 78–95.
42) This is different from asserting that the biblical text be taken literally in such cases. Maimonides specifically says that the literal meaning of the text has no bearing on the question. *Guide* II:25, 327.
43) *Guide* III:14, 459.
44) In this context it is worth noting another explanation why Maimonides placed III:15 in its present position, offered by the fifteenth-century commentator Shem Tov, who stated that the reason is that it is related to the previous discussion of "problems of evil". He argues that it is impossible that there be a human, made out of matter, who does not decay. Therefore, evil is inevitable if there are humans. For more on questions of evil in Maimonides, see Oliver Leaman, *Evil and*

Suffering in Jewish Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 64–101.

45) Manekin, "Divine Will", 219.

46) For an examination of Maimonides' critique of the theologians, see Joel Kraemer, "Maimonides' Use of (Aristotelian) Dialectic," in Cohen and Levine (eds.), *Maimonides and the Sciences* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2000), 111–130.

47) *Guide* I:71, 182.

48) *Guide* I:73, 206.

49) Pines renders this phrase "violently rebutted". *Guide* III:15, 460. For the Arabic phrase, see Maimonides, *Dalālat al-Ḥā'irīn*, ed. Joel and Munk (Jerusalem: Azrieli, 1929), 332:10.

50) *Guide* II:22, 319. Pines continue "or shorten a worm's foot". Since worms do not have feet, this statement could be taken to indicate that Maimonides presents these examples as nonsensical and therefore impossible. However, dūd, rendered "worm", can also mean "caterpillar" or "insect". The length of a fly's wing might seem either necessitated or random, but Maimonides indicates that it can be a result of God's will.

51) God's causality must be totally different from that of created beings so that the two causes do not compete. See Burrell, *Freedom and Creation*, 97–101.

52) For further see Tamar Rudavsky, *Maimonides* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 46.

53) The term "novel will" is taken from Manekin, "Divine Will".

54) It might be objected that this idea would fall foul of Maimonides' extreme negative theology, particularly since he states that no relation can be predicated of God. *Guide* I:52, 117. However, there he is considering a reciprocal relation. That is different from the sui generis relation of creator to creature, indicated in MT and translated in Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader*, 44. Negative theology in the Guide is concerned with which words can be used properly of God, and is connected to Maimonides' ideas about language rather than what we know of God. The doctrine examines the logic of statements about God. Given that God has no attributes, how can statements about God's attributes be understood. Following Manekin's argument, Maimonides' doctrine is less pessimistic than is often thought, "Belief, Certainty, and Divine Attributes."

55) *Guide* II:30, 349.

56) *Guide* II:30, 350.

57) Maimonides makes this distinction in II:10, 272.

58) The farmer does not continue to sow, whereas God continues to create, so the analogy is still limited, but that in no way diminishes its explanatory appeal.

59) This argument is made more extensively by David Burrell, "Why not Pursue the Metaphor of Artisan and View God's Knowledge as Practical?," in Lenn Evan Goodman (ed.) *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 207–215. Burrell notes that Maimonides recommends the image since it will not mislead, and it therefore accords with Maimonides' negative theology.