

Three Types of Theology in Maimonides David Bakan and Dan Merkur

Contemporary discussions of science and humanism are heirs to an earlier debate between science and religion, which had its roots in Christian theological distinctions between body and soul, matter and spirit, and the secular and the sacred. Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (1135-1204), who was known in Latin as Moses Maimonides, was sensitive to the debate, which was a live question for Jews in his era; but he made the claim that the debate had three terms. He presented his typology as a historical typology of religion.

In Maimonides' presentation, religion commenced with Adam, but people gradually fell into error. Enosh and others of his generation honored the stars and spheres as a means to honor God indirectly. This invention of inappropriate devotions was "the root of idolatry."

They began to erect temples to the stars, offered up sacrifices to them, praised and glorified them in speech, and prostrated themselves before them--their purpose, according to their perverse notions, being to obtain the Creator's favor. (*Book of Knowledge, Laws Concerning Idolatry and the Ordinances of the Heathens* 1:1; p. 66a)

People of Enosh's generation continued to know God. "Their error and folly consists in imagining that this vain worship" (ibid.) was God's desire.

Over time, however, false prophets arose who claimed that God commanded the worship of a star, or all the stars. The false prophets claimed that a star "conferred benefits and inflicted injuries, and that it was proper to worship and fear it." They had their followers create figures of the stars that they had seen in their visions, and the name of God came to be forgotten.

All the common people and the women and children knew only the figure of wood and stone, and the temple edifice in which they had, from their childhood, been trained to prostrate to the figure, worship it and swear by its name. Even their wise men, such as priests and men of similar standing, also fancied that there was no other god but the stars and spheres, for whose sake and in whose similitude these figures had been made. (*Book of Knowledge, Laws Concerning Idolatry and the Ordinances of the Heathens* 1:2; pp. 66a-66b)

During the second era in the history of religion, idolatry of the stars and spheres prevailed. Only "a few solitary individuals, such as Enosh, Methuselah, Noah, Shem and Eber" knew the Creator of the universe. The third era in the history of religion began with Abraham's discovery and public assertion of the truth of religion, but religion was then the personal concern of individuals. The fourth era in the history of religion began when Abraham's legacy was developed into a code of communal practice by Moses.

Maimonides' account of the history of religion provided a framework for his discussion of three types of theology. Just as Maimonides understood religion in the singular, with all deviations from the truth of religion being idolatries and erroneous devotions, so he understood philosophy in the singular, and not as a congeries of divergent schools. He thought of philosophy as we today think of science. For Maimonides, there were truth and error in philosophy, but the concept of a plurality of philosophies was a contradiction in terms.

Maimonides' Ecumenical Intention

Maimonides' claim that true religion was re-asserted by Abraham served an ecumenical purpose by appealing to an ostensibly historical figure that Judaism shared with both Islam and Christianity. Moreover, Maimonides based his appeal not on revelation but on philo-

sophy. For Maimonides, philosophy began with Abraham. It was through philosophical investigations that Abraham had come to discover God. In his time, the worship of the stars and spheres had been commonplace.

The Creator of the Universe was known to none, and recognised by none, save a few solitary individuals, such as Enosh, Methuselah, Noah, Shem and Eber. The world moved on in this fashion, till that Pillar of the World, the Patriarch Abraham, was born. After he was weaned, while still an infant, his mind began to reflect. By day and by night he was thinking and wondering: 'How is it possible that this (celestial) sphere should continuously be guiding the world and have no one to guide it and cause it to turn round; for it cannot be that it turns round of itself'. He had no teacher, no one to instruct him. He was submerged, in Ur of the Chaldees, among silly idolaters....But his mind was busily working and reflecting till he had attained the way of truth, apprehended the correct line of thought and knew that there is One God, that He guides the celestial Sphere and created everything, and that among all that exist, there is no god beside Him. He realised that the whole world was in error, and that what had occasioned their error was that they worshiped the stars and the images, so that the truth perished from their mind. (*Book of Knowledge, Laws Concerning Idolatry and the Ordinances of the Heathens* I:1; p. 66b; compare *Guide* III:29; p. 516)

Maimonides' account of Abraham in the midst of astral worshipers was consistent with the way in which the Qur'an sees Abraham and his discovery of the existence of God.

So also did We show Abraham the realm of the heavens and earth, that he might have certitude. When the night covered him over he saw a star. He said 'This is my Lord' but when it set he said 'I love not those that set.' When he saw the moon rising in splendor he said 'This is my Lord'; but when the moon set he said 'Unless my Lord guide me, I shall surely be among those who go astray.' When he saw the sun rising in splendor he said 'This is my Lord, this is the greatest.' But when the sun set he said 'O my people. I am indeed free from your (guilt of) giving partners (to the One True God). For me, I have set my face firmly and truly towards Him who created the heavens and the earth, and never shall I give partners to Him.' (Qur'an 6: 75-78)

Philosophy was responsible for Abraham's turn to monotheism. According to Maimonides, Abraham "claimed...that speculation and reasoning had come to him indicating to him that the world as a whole has a deity" (*Guide* I:63; p. 152). His belief in the unity of God pertained to God as the Creator of the natural world.

It was *Abraham our Father, peace be on him*, who began to proclaim in public this opinion to which speculation had led him. For this reason, he made his proclamation *in the Name of the Lord, God of the world* [Genesis 21:33]; he had also explicitly stated this opinion in saying: *Maker of heaven and earth* [Genesis 14:22]. (*Guide* II:15; p. 282)

In Maimonides' use, the term "philosophy" included the sciences of physics, chemistry, biology, and psychology, as well as ethics, metaphysics, logic, rhetoric, poetics, and so forth (Davidson, 2005, p. 87). Because the terms "philosophy" and "science" no longer retain the synonymous use that they had in Maimonides' era, Abraham's discovery of the existence of God would ordinarily be termed "philosophical" today. In Maimonides' view, however, Abraham's discovery of the existence of God was what we would describe as a scientific discovery, using the word "scientific" in the modern sense. It was a logical inference

from physical evidence, the simplest sufficient hypothesis by which to account for observed data. Abraham proceeded by reasoning philosophically from the evidence of astronomical science, and the biblical prophets had all followed his example. "All the prophets used the stars and the spheres as proofs for the deity's existing necessarily. Thus in the traditional story of *Abraham*, there occurs the tale, which is generally known, about his contemplation of the stars" (*Guide II:19*; p. 310).

Maimonides credited Abraham with the kind of theological argument that has been known since the early nineteenth century as an argument from design (Paley, 1918). Uses of the argument go back to antiquity, if not to prehistory. Throughout the middle ages, the orderly motions of the planets and stars were cited as evidence of a single, supraordinate cause of celestial order; and the Abrahamic religions identified the supraordinate cause with the creator God of their scriptures. Because medieval uses of arguments from design reasoned inductively from nature to God, they affirmed the orderliness of nature. In this respect, they differed from contemporary arguments about "intelligent design" (Manson, 2003), which claim to the contrary that some physical phenomena exhibit an intelligence that exceeds the natural order.

Not only did Abraham attain his belief in the unity of God through philosophic speculation, but according to Maimonides he taught his belief in a consistent manner. What Abraham transmitted to the people was philosophical learning. He did not make his case for the unity of God by appealing to faith in himself as a prophet. He made his case as a philosopher who appealed to human reason.

Abraham assembled the people and called them by the way of teaching and instruction to adhere to the truth that he had grasped. Thus *Abraham* taught the people and explained to them by means of speculative proofs that the world has but one deity, that He has created all the things that are other than Himself, and that none of the forms and no created thing in general ought to be worshipped. This is what he instructed the people in, attracting them by means of eloquent speeches and by means of the benefits he conferred upon them. But he never said: God has sent me to you and has given me commandments and prohibitions. Even when the commandment of circumcision was laid upon him, his sons, and those who belonged to him, he circumcised them alone and did not use the form of a prophetic call to exhort the people to do this. (*Guide II:39*; p. 379)

Maimonides did not deny that Abraham was a prophet. To the contrary, he maintained that Abraham was the first of the prophets. However, no one, according to Maimonides, can prophesy who is not firstly a philosopher. Every prophet in Scripture was a philosopher before he could become a prophet. "The true prophets indubitably grasp speculative matters" (*Guide II:38*; p. 377). A person must become "perfect with respect to his rational and moral qualities," that is, in his command of philosophy and ethical behavior, before he can go on to become a prophet. "It is not possible," Maimonides flatly stated, "that an ignoramus should turn into a prophet" (*Guide II:32*; p. 361).

Because the unity of God was discovered and could be demonstrated philosophically, its knowledge was within the reach of anyone who applied himself to the topic.

These two principles, I mean the existence of the deity and His being one, are knowable by human speculation alone. Now with regard to everything that can be known by demonstration, the status of the prophet and that of everyone else who knows it are equal; there is no superiority of one over the other. Thus these two principles are not known through prophecy alone. (*Guide II:33*; p. 364)

The Sabians

Maimonides identified the idolaters who worshipped the stars and spheres as Sabians. Historically, the Sabians were a people whom the Qur'an mentioned as a people of the book, toward whom Muslims were to exercise religious tolerance. Both the Mandaeans of Iraq and the Hermetists of Harran in Syria subsequently enjoyed religious tolerance by calling themselves Sabians; and the Harranians played an important role in the transmission of Greek philosophy and science to the Arabs. The Harranian contribution can be discerned in Baghdad as early as the court of Harun al-Raschid, at the start of the ninth century (Peters, 1990). The religious tradition that Maimonides describes as Sabian was consistent with what we know of Harranian religion, which consisted of astral worship to which a blend of Neoplatonism and Hermetism had been added. Among other particulars, Maimonides referred specifically to a doctrine that is extant in a Latin translation of a Hermetic text that is known as the *Asclepius*

The Sabians set up statues for the planets....and thought that the forces of the planets overflowed toward these statues and that consequently these statues talked, had understanding, gave prophetic revelation to people-I mean, the statues-and made known to people what was useful to them. (*Guide* III:29; p. 516; see also: *Guide* I:63; pp. 152-53)

Maimonides also referred by name to a famous Hermetic philosopher and translator of the early tenth century, Thabit ibn Qurra (*Guide* II:24; p. 325), who moved from Harran to Baghdad where he established a school. In the centuries between Thabit and Maimonides, the Harranian blend of Hermetism, Neoplatonism, and Neopythagorism had impacted on medieval Jewish philosophy at second hand. Hermetism influenced the anonymous Muslim encyclopedists who wrote the fifty-one *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity (Rasai 'l Ikhwan-as-Safa)*, which combined Aristotelian logic and physics with Neoplatonic metaphysics and theology. The Brethren of Purity influenced medieval Jewish philosophers such as Solomon Ibn Gabirol, Bahya ibn Pakuda, Joseph Ibn Zaddik, Judah Halevi, Moses and Abraham ibn Ezra (Husik, 1916, p. xxxix), and Nathanael Ibn al-Fayyumi (1908), to whose son Maimonides addressed the *Letter to Yemen*.

In Maimonides' view, the Sabians of his own era were a remnant of what, prior to Abraham, had been "a religious community that extended over the whole earth." Among Sabian remnants, Maimonides counted "for example the infidels among the Turks in the extreme North and the Hindus in the extreme South." His broad definition of Sabians reflected his use of the term to express a general type of theological orientation.

The utmost attained by the speculation of those who philosophized in those times consisted in imagining that God was the spirit of the sphere and that the sphere and the stars are a body of which the deity, may He be exalted, is its spirit....all the Sabians believed in the eternity of the world, since in their opinion heaven is the deity. (*Guide* III:29; p. 515)

Wherever astral worship was to be found, Maimonides was prepared to speak of Sabianism.

Because Maimonides held that angelic intelligences informed the unchanging matter of the stars and spheres, he never questioned the reality of the metaphysical beings whom idolaters worshipped. His theory of comparative religion, that gentiles wrongly worship angels as though they were gods, had both biblical and talmudic precedents. Maimonides wrote:

The spheres apprehend and know that which they govern. This also is expounded in the letter of the *Torah*, which says: *Which the Lord thy God hath allotted unto all the peoples*, which means that He made the spheres intermediaries for the gover-

nance of the created beings and not with a view to their being worshipped. It says clearly: *And to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide*, and so on [Genesis 1:18]. (*Guide* II:5; pp. 260-61)

Maimonides objected, as we have seen, to devotions to the angelic intelligences that governed the stars. In Maimonides' view, the angelic intelligences were limited in their functions to producing the natural activities of the planets and stars. They did not intervene miraculously in human affairs.

Maimonides also objected to astral worship on philosophical grounds. The philosophical consequences of astral worship were inconsistent with the philosophical foundation of the Torah. Maimonides explained:

The absurd ideas of astrologers...falsely assert that the constellation at the time of one's birth determines whether one is to be virtuous or vicious, the individual being thus necessarily compelled to follow out a certain line of conduct. We, on the contrary, are convinced that our Law agrees with Greek philosophy, which substantiates with convincing proofs the contention that man's conduct is entirely in his own hands, that no compulsion is exerted, and that no external influence is brought to bear upon him that constrains him to be either virtuous or vicious, except inasmuch as, according to what we have said above, he may be by nature so constituted as to find it easy or hard, as the case may be, to do a certain thing; but that he must necessarily do, or refrain from doing, a certain thing is absolutely untrue. Were a man compelled to act according to the dictates of predestination, then the commands and prohibitions of the Law would become null and void, and the Law would be completely false, since man would have no freedom of choice in what he does. Moreover, it would be useless, in fact absolutely in vain, for man to study, to instruct, or attempt to learn an art, as it would be entirely impossible for him, on account of the external force compelling him, according to the opinion of those who hold this view, to keep from doing a certain act, from gaining certain knowledge, or from acquiring a certain characteristic. Reward and punishment, too, would be pure injustice, both as regards man towards man, and as between God and man. Suppose, under such conditions, that Simeon should kill Reuben. Why should the former be punished, seeing that he was constrained to do the killing, and Reuben was predestined to be slain? How could the Almighty, who is just and righteous, chastise Simeon for a deed which it was impossible for him to leave undone, and which, though he strove with all his might, he would be unable to avoid? If such were the true state of affairs, all precautionary measures, such as building houses, providing means of subsistence, fleeing when one fears danger, and so forth, would be absolutely useless, for that which is decreed beforehand must necessarily happen. This theory is, therefore, positively unsound, contrary to reason and common sense, subversive of the fundamental principles of religion, and attributes injustice to God (far be it from Him!). In reality, the undoubted truth of the matter is that man has full sway over all his actions. (*Eight Chapters* viii; pp. 86-87)

Maimonides here contrasted the positions that are today commonly phrased in terms of science and humanism. Whether determinism takes form as natal astrology or any other variant, including the mechanical clockwork cosmos of modern operational science, the philosophic assumption that necessity invariably governs the course of human experience is irreconcilable with belief in good and evil, free choice, reward and punishment, and other "fundamental principles of religion."

Aristotle

In attributing belief in the eternity of the world to the Sabians, Maimonides implied that Aristotle, who championed belief in the eternity of the world, was tainted with the Sabians' idolatry. Maimonides was a powerful exponent of medieval Aristotelian philosophy, who influenced both Jewish and Christian theology and mysticism; but his endorsement of Aristotelianism included a far-reaching criticism. Contrasting Aristotelianism with Judaism, he stated: "You will find no difference other than...that they regard the world as eternal and we regard it as produced in time" (*Guide* III:25; p. 506).

For Maimonides, the doctrine of the eternity of the world, which Aristotle shared with the Sabians, was untenable because it denied the possibility of divine action within the world. In modern terms, Maimonides saw Aristotle as a determinist, precisely as he had seen astrologers.

[Aristotle] thinks...that this whole higher and lower order cannot be corrupted and abolished, that no innovation can take place in it that is not according to its nature, and that no occurrence that deviates from what is analogous to it can happen in it in any way. He asserts--though he does not do so textually, but this is what his opinion comes to--that in his opinion it would be an impossibility that will should change in God or a new volition arise in Him; and that all that exists has been brought into existence, in the state in which it is at present, by God though His volition; but that it was not produced after having been in a state of nonexistence. He thinks 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. Accordingly it follows necessarily that this being as a whole has never ceased to be as it is at present and will be as it is in the future eternity. (*Guide* II:15; p. 284)

The logical problem with Aristotle's position was that in deifying the world, it made God subject to nature. It left no room for God to exercise God's will, to reveal the Law, or to create miracles.

The belief in eternity the way Aristotle sees it--that is, the belief according to which the world exists in virtue of necessity, that no nature changes at all, and that the customary course of events cannot be modified with regard to everything--destroys the Law in its principle, necessarily gives the lie to every miracle, and reduces to inanity all the hopes and threats that the Law has held out. (*Guide* II:25; p. 328)

We may add that the determinism that Maimonides attributed to Aristotle also precluded belief in good and evil and the human ability to choose freely between them. Morality cannot exist in a universe that is governed exclusively by determinism. Maimonides was well aware that Aristotle wrote extensively about morality, and he valued many of Aristotle's contributions to ethics. At the same time, he faulted Aristotle for his doctrine of the eternity of the world, because it implied a determinism that was inconsistent, among other matters, with Aristotle's own and valid teachings regarding ethics.

The Kalam

Maimonides also devoted considerable space to the analysis and refutation of the Kalam, one of the major schools of Muslim theology. The Kalam sought in its own way to reconcile Islam with Aristotelianism. Over the centuries, the Kalam developed into several subsidiary schools, of which the earliest, the Mutakallimun, had influenced Rabbi Saadia Gaon, whose *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* was one of the first works of medieval Jewish philosophy. For Maimonides' purposes, the theology of the Kalam represented the antithesis of

Aristotelianism. Where Aristotle insisted on the universality of nature, the Mutakallimun denied nature's existence. The conclusions differed, Maimonides argued, because Aristotle and the Mutakallimun diverged in their methods of argumentation. Maimonides accused the Mutakallimun of special pleading on behalf of beliefs to which they were committed *a priori*.

All the first Mutakallimun from among the Greeks who had adopted Christianity and from among the Moslems did not conform in their premises to the appearance of that which exists, but considered how being ought to be in order that it should furnish a proof for the correctness of a particular opinion, or at least should not refute it. And when such a fantasy held good, they assumed that what exists corresponds to that form and started to argue in order to establish the truth of the assertions from which are taken the premises that show the correctness of their doctrine or that at least do not refute it. (*Guide I:71*; p. 178)

For Maimonides, the Mutakallimun represented an Islamic variation of a Christian theological practice. Greeks and Syrians who embraced Christian beliefs as dogmas abandoned philosophic methods, and the Mutakallimun similarly argued by proceeding from axiomatic beliefs.

The Christian preaching being what it is known to be, and inasmuch as the opinions of the philosophers were widely accepted in those communities in which philosophy had first risen, and inasmuch as kings rose who protected religion—the learned of those periods from the Greeks and the Syrians saw that those preachings are greatly and clearly opposed to the philosophic opinions. Thus there arose among them this science of kalam. They started to establish premises that would be useful to them with regard to their belief. (*Guide I:71*; p. 177)

Unlike Aristotle who built his philosophy from the bottom up, beginning with the evidence of the senses and formulating abstract concepts on their basis, the Mutakallimun reasoned speculatively from the top down, postulating axiomatic assumptions and articulating a system that had internal coherence but no necessary correspondence to the perceptible world. Conforming *a priori* to axiomatic propositions that they held as dogmas, the Mutakallimun were not prepared to do an honest job of philosophizing. Although Maimonides shared their belief in creation, he rejected the method of argumentation by which they arrive at it. The Mutakallimun began with accepting the existence, unity and incorporeality of God and proceeded by finding pretexts by which to rationalize their prior assumptions. The Mutakallimun maintained their position at the expense of denying the evidence of the senses. “Whenever we apprehend with our senses things controverting their assumptions, they are able to say: no attention should be paid to the senses as the matter—which, as they think—has been proven by the intellect—is demonstrated” (*Guide I:73*; p. 214). Nothing that could be sense perceived or determined scientifically could invalidate theological beliefs that were held *a priori*. Maimonides did not consider the Mutakallimun to be practitioners of philosophy, and they would have been pleased to agree (Davidson, 2005, p. 87).

The Kalam's method of argumentation allowed Mutakallimun to reach conclusions that Maimonides found objectionable. The dogmatic method of the Mutakallimun led them to claim that because God's power is complete, God can make anything exist. To sustain their position, they went so far as to deny the conformity of the cosmos with natural laws. God's omnipotence precluded the possibility that there might be any restriction on God to conformity with natural laws. “The proofs of the Mutakallimun...derived from premises that run counter to the nature of existence that is perceived so that they resort to the affirmation that nothing has a nature in any respect” (*Guide I:71*; p. 182). For the Mutakallimun, the freedom of God from limitation meant that the concept of nature was a fallacy. There could be no natural laws. What appears to humanity as natural regularity is, for God, merely a

custom. "The foundation of everything is that no consideration is due to how that which exists is, for it is merely a custom; and from the point of view of the intellect, it could well be different" (*Guide I:71*; p. 179). It was not merely that if God should wish something else to exist, it would do so. Nothing had intrinsic properties that constituted it as a particular existent, rather than another. Nothing had objective reality in its own right. Anything might become something else at any moment that God willed.

For Maimonides, the Kalam's inflation of the domain of the miraculous at the expense of the domain of the natural was inconsistent with the existence of free will. To account for freedom of will, the existence of the natural had to be affirmed. Human will could not otherwise be independent of divine will.

The theory generally accepted by people and found in rabbinical and prophetic writings, that man's...movements are governed by the will and desire of God, is true only in one respect...[W]hen a stone is thrown in the air and falls to the ground, it is correct to say that the stone fell in accordance with the will of God, for it is true that God decreed that the earth...should be a center of attraction...But it is wrong to suppose that when a certain part of the earth is thrown upward God wills at that very moment that it should fall. The *Mutakallimun* are, however, of a different opinion in this regard, for I have heard them say that the Divine Will is constantly at work, decreeing everything from time to time. We do not agree with them, but believe that the Divine Will ordained everything at creation, and that all things, at all times, are regulated by the laws of nature, and run their natural course, in accordance with what Solomon said, "As it was, so it will ever be, as it was made so it continues, and there is nothing new under the sun. (*Eight Chapters* viii; p. 90)

In presenting his views, Maimonides cited the precedent of the Talmud, "Everything follows its natural course" (*Eight Chapters*, viii; p. 91; citing BT, *Avodah Zarah* 54b).

In addition to his discussion of the *Mutakallimun*, Maimonides commented on the slightly different position of the Kalam that had been developed among the Ash`ariyya, whose theology became official for Sunnite Islam, and among the Mu`tazila, one of the later sects of the Kalam. The Ash`ariyya predicated their arguments on the doctrine of divine omniscience.

....the opinion...that in all that exists there is nothing either among universal or particular things that is in any respect due to chance, for everything comes about through will, purpose, and governance. Now it is clear that everything that is governed is also known. This is the opinion of the Islamic sect, the Ash`ariyya. Great incongruities are bound up with this opinion, and those who hold it are burdened with them and obliged to accept them....They say:...the wind does not blow by chance, for God sets it in motion; and it is not the wind that causes the leaves to fall, for ever leaf falls through an ordinance and a decree of God; and it is He who causes them to fall now in this particular place; it is not possible that the time of their falling should be postponed or retarded; nor is it possible that they should fall in another place than this, for all this has been everlastingly decreed. In consequence of this opinion, they are obliged to think that every motion and rest of animals has been decreed and that man has in no way the ability to do or not to do a thing. (*Guide III:17*; pp.. 466-67)

The Ash`arite dogma of perfect omniscience necessitated a doctrine of perfect omnipotence that was internally contradictory and inconsistent with the philosophical principles of the Torah.

It...follows necessarily from this opinion that what the Laws entail is quite useless; for man for whose benefit every Law has come, has not the ability to do anything either to fulfill what he has been commanded or to avoid what he has been forbidden. In fact this sect says that He, may He be exalted, willed this: to send messengers, to command, to forbid, to threaten, to give hope, and to instill fear, even though we do not have the ability to do anything of our own accord; it is permissible that He should impose upon us impossible things; and it is likewise permissible that, having obeyed His order, we should be punished; and that, having transgressed it, we should be rewarded....And in this there is no injustice, for according to them, it is permissible for God to punish one who has not sinned and to reward a sinner with benefits. (*Guide* III:17; pp. 466-67)

Sensitive to the quandary of the Ash`arites, the Mu`tazilite school of the Kalam arrived at a different but equally untenable quandary of its own.

[They] hold that man has the ability to act of his own accord; it is for this reason that, according to them, the commandments, prohibitions, rewards, and punishments figuring in the Law are well ordered. They hold that all the actions of God are consequent upon wisdom, that injustice is not permissible for Him, and that He does not punish a man who does good. The Mu`tazila...hold this opinion though, according to them, the ability of man to act of his own accord is not absolute. They also believe that He, may He be exalted, has knowledge of the falling of this particular leaf and of the creeping of this particular ant, and that His providence watches over all beings. Incongruities and contradictions follow necessarily also from this opinion. As for the incongruity, it is as follows. If some human individual is born with an infirmity without having sinned, they say: This is consequent upon His wisdom, and it is better for this individual to be thus than to be sound in body; we do not know in what this benefit consists, but this has not happened as a punishment for him, but as a benefit. And they have a similar answer with regard to the case in which an excellent man perishes, saying that this happens in order that his reward in the other world should become greater. Finally discussion with these reached a point at which they were asked: Why is He just toward man and not just to what is other than man? because of what sin has this particular animal been killed? Whereupon they assumed the burden of the following disgraceful answer: This is better for it, so that God should compensate it in the other world. Even when a flea and a louse are killed, it is necessary that they have a compensation for them from God....they believe both that He, may He be exalted, knows everything and that man has the ability to act; and this leads, as the slightest reflection should make clear, to self-contradiction. (*Guide* III:17; pp. 467-68)

For the Mu`tazila, the dogma of divine omniscience, with its corollary doctrine of divine omnipotence, was to be reconciled with doctrine of divine justice by allowing that divine justice does not occur in this world, but does occur in the hereafter. Having no basis to discriminate between animal and human experiences of injustice in this world, the Mu`tazilites maintained that divine justice is extended in the world to come individually to all animals, as well as to all people.

The Position of the Torah

Discussing the doctrine of creation, Maimonides stated: "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* II:25; p. 329). Let us unpack this overly succinct remark.

Regarding the creation, Maimonides stated:

The world as a whole—I mean to say, every existent other than God, may he be exalted—was brought into existence by God after having been purely and absolutely nonexistence, and...God, may He be exalted, had existed alone, and nothing else—neither an angel nor a sphere nor what subsists within the sphere. 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* II:13; p. 281)

Davidson (2005, p. 366) explained that “Maimonides speaks here of creation *after* non-existence, but a more common name for the position he defends is creation *out of* nothing, or *ex nihilo*, that is to say, creation not from anything already existent.” Pines’s translation, “creation in time,” is misleading, because it failed to explain that time itself was created as part of the creation. Following Plato, Maimonides maintained that time is a function of motion. “Time is...an accident...necessarily following upon motion” (*Guide* II:13; p. 281). If there is nothing to move, time cannot pass.

Because the universe was created in its entirety, the laws, processes, and phenomena of nature are themselves contingent on their creations by God.

All natural things are called *the work of the Lord: These saw the works of the Lord* [Psalm 107:24]. Accordingly after he has mentioned all natural things, such as plants, animals, winds, rain, and others of the same kind, he says: *How manifold are Thy works, O Lord* [Psalm 104:24]! (*Guide* I:66; p. 160)

Rabbinical teachings also associated divine creation with the occurrence of miracles. Maimonides writes that the Sages held that “all miracles which deviate from the natural course of events...were foreordained by the Divine Will during the six days of creation.” Although such a miracle “may have been regarded as an absolute innovation...in reality it was not” (*Eight Chapters* viii; pp. 90-91). The rabbinical teaching should be understood to refer not to the specific contents of particular miracles, but to the possibility of the occurrence of miracles in general. When God created the universe, God created its autonomous nature in a way that also provided a place for miracles.

Like creation, miracles depend directly on God’s exercise of God’s free will. Maimonides used the example of prophecy to illustrate the general principle.

We believe that it may happen that one who is fit for prophecy and prepared for it should not become a prophet, namely, on account of the divine will. To my mind this is like all the miracles and takes the same course as they. (*Guide* II:32; p. 361)

Miracles are divine interventions within a universe that is otherwise governed by natural laws. Natural processes are creations that have been designed to function autonomously. Miracles differ. Like the initial creation of the universe, miracles are exceptions to the autonomous processes of nature.

That which exists has had a beginning, and at first nothing at all existed except God. His wisdom required that He should bring creation into existence at the time when he did do it, and that what He has brought into existence should not be annihilated nor any of its natures changed except in certain particulars that He willed to change; about some of these we know, whereas about others that will be changed in the future we do not know. This is our opinion and the basis of our Law. (*Guide* II:29; p. 346)

Maimonides’ comment, “This is our opinion and the basis of our Law,” expressed his view that Judaism holds to a discrete position that differed alike from the exclusive naturalism of Aristotle and the exclusive supernaturalism of the Kalam. Judaism holds that nature

prevails unless God wills a miracle. Because creation was a supernatural event and nature came into being through creation, exceptions to nature--miracles--remained possible. No contradictions are implied. The universe was so created that much of it proceeds naturally and lawfully, but part of it remains forever subject to the immediate originality of creation itself. Maimonides insisted that with miracles, nothing was impossible. For example, in the course of criticizing Galen, he wrote: "He should have...been skeptical whether the sudden creation of a horse from dust is possible, as Moses, may he rest in peace, said, or impossible, as is stated by those who are convinced of the eternity of the world" (*Medical Aphorisms*, II, p. 217).

Maimonides' claim that "this is...the basis of our Law" may also be taken in a second sense. When Maimonides stated "that with a belief in the creation of the world in time, all the miracles become possible and the Law becomes possible," he asserted that the revelation of the Torah to Moses was a miracle. Because it flowed directly from the divine will, nothing more could be said about it. "As for the prophecy of Moses our Master, I shall not touch upon it in these chapters with even a single word, either in explicit fashion or in a flash" (*Guide* II:35; p. 367).

Much as Maimonides affirmed belief in miracles, he followed the rabbinic Sages in cautioning against their discussion. It was enough, in his view, to occupy oneself with the study of nature, because nature was within the reach of the human intellect, whereas miracles were not.

It likewise refers to this in the dictum: *Guard thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and so on* [Eccl 4:17]. This is also referred to by David in the dictum: *Neither do I exercise myself in things too great or in things too marvellous for me* [Ps 131:1]. The Sages too intended to express this notion in their dictum: *Do not inquire about things that are too marvellous for you; do not investigate what is hidden from you; inquire into things that are permitted to you; you have no business with marvels* [BT, Hagigah, 13a]. This means that you should let your intellect move about only within the domain of things that man is able to grasp. (*Guide* I:32; p. 69)

Conclusions

We have ventured to suggest that Maimonides conceptualized the Torah as a coherent system of thought. The prophetic worldview, with its historical claim of the revelation of the Torah to Moses, implied a philosophic position regarding the creation of lawfulness in nature, which in Maimonides's view happened to be correct. The Torah successfully avoided both the exclusive determinism that astrologers and Aristotelians attributed to nature and the exclusive omnipotence that Christian theologians and the Muslim Kalam attributed to God. Maimonides rejected as overly simple the conventional polarizations of the debate between naturalism and supernaturalism, or reason and revelation. His understanding of human experience included both law and miracles, both autonomous processes of nature and divine interventions. He reconciled naturalism with divine omnipotence when he asserted that God has the power to create a universe that manifests a lawful nature of its own. The existence of human freedom of will, on which all morality depends, similarly involves God's voluntary limitation of his omnipotence. In Maimonides' presentation, the initial act of creation, the revelation of the Torah, and all other miracles proceed *ex nihilo*, but the remainder of creation conforms with autonomous laws of nature. Although Maimonides cited the Bible and Talmud as precedents for his position, he argued not from revelation but from philosophy. It was his claim that anyone, of any cultural background, who pursued philosophy and science correctly, would find the prophetic doctrine of the creation of nature to be the only philosophically tenable system of thought.

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