

Maimonides, The Guide of the Perplexed

- * Part II, Chapter 25: On Creation vs. Eternity of the World
- * Part III, Chapter 54: On Human Perfection

From: Daniel H. Frank, Oliver Leaman and Charles H. Manekin,
The Jewish Philosophy Reader, London and New York, 2000

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The Guide of the Perplexed (1190)

Part II, Chapter 25 [Creation vs. Eternity of the World]

Know that our shunning the affirmation of the eternity of the world is not due to a text figuring in the Torah according to which the world has been produced in time. For the texts indicating that the world has been produced in time are not more numerous than those indicating that the deity is a body. Nor are the gates of figurative interpretation shut in our faces or impossible of access to us regarding the subject of the creation of the world in time. For we could interpret them as figurative, as we have done when denying His corporeality. Perhaps this would even be much easier to do: we should be very well able to give a figurative interpretation of those texts and to affirm as true the eternity of the world, just as we have given a figurative interpretation of those other texts and have denied that He, may He be exalted, is a body.

Two causes are responsible for our not doing this or believing it. One of them is as follows. That the deity is not a body has been demonstrated; from this it follows necessarily that everything that in its external meaning disagrees with this demonstration must be interpreted figuratively, for it is known that such texts are of necessity fit for figurative interpretation. However, the eternity of the world has not been demonstrated. Consequently in this case the texts ought not to be rejected and figuratively interpreted in order to make prevail an opinion whose contrary can be made to prevail by means of various sorts of arguments. This is one cause. The second cause is as follows. Our belief that the deity is not a body destroys for us none of the foundations of the Law and does not give the lie to the claims of any prophet. The only objection to it is constituted by the fact that the ignorant think that this belief is contrary to the text; yet it is not contrary to it, as we have explained, but is intended by the text. On the other hand, 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 anything – 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, unless – by God – one interprets the miracles figuratively also, as was done by the Islamic internalists;¹⁶ this, however, would result in some sort of crazy imaginings.

If, however, one believed in eternity according to the second opinion we have explained¹⁷ – which is the opinion of Plato – according to which the heavens too are subject to generation and corruption, this opinion would not destroy the foundations of the Law and would be followed not by the lie being given to miracles, but by their becoming admissible. It would also be possible to interpret figuratively the texts in accordance with this opinion. And many obscure passages can be found in the texts of the Torah and with which this opinion could be connected or rather by means of which it could be proved. However, no necessity could impel us to do this unless this opinion were demonstrated. In view of the fact that it has not been demonstrated, we shall not favour this opinion, nor shall we at all heed that other opinion, but rather shall take the texts according to their external sense and shall say: The Law has given us knowledge of a matter the grasp of which is not within our power, and the miracle attests to the correctness of our claims.

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? Why did God give this Law to this particular nation, and why did He not legislate to the others? Why did He legislate at this particular time, and why did He not legislate before it or after? Why did He impose these commandments and prohibitions? Why did He privilege the prophet with the miracles in relation to him and not with some others? What was God's aim in giving this Law? Why did He not, if such was His purpose,¹⁸ put the accomplishment of the commandments and the non-transgression of the prohibitions into our nature? If this were said, the answer to all these questions would be that it would be said: He wanted it this way; or His wisdom required it this way. And just as He brought the world into existence, the form it has, when He wanted to, without our knowing His will with regard to this or in what respect there was wisdom in His particularizing the forms of the world and the time of its creation – in the same way we do not know His will or the exigency of His wisdom that caused all the matters, about which questions have been posed above, to be particularized. If, however, someone says that the world is as it is in virtue of necessity, it would be a necessary obligation to ask all those questions; and there would be no way out of them except through a recourse to unseemly answers in which there would be combined the giving the lie to, and the annulment of, all the external meanings of the Law with regard to which no intelligent man has any doubt that they are to be taken in their external meanings. It is then because of this that this opinion is shunned¹⁹ and that the lives of virtuous men have been and will be spent in investigating this question. For if creation in time were demonstrated – if only as Plato understands creation – all the overhasty²⁰ claims made to us on this point by the philosophers would become void. In the same way, if the philosophers would succeed in demonstrating eternity as Aristotle understands it, the Law as a whole would become void, and a shift to other opinions would take place. I have thus explained to you that everything is bound up with this problem. Know this.

Part III, Chapter 54 [Human Perfection]³⁸

... The ancient and the modern philosophers have made it clear that the perfections to be found in man consist of four species. The first and the most defective, but with a view to which the people of the earth spend their lives,³⁴ is the perfection of possessions – that is, of what belongs to the individual in the manner of money, garments, tools, slaves, land and other things of this kind. A man's being a great king also belongs to this species of perfection. Between this perfection and the individual himself there is no union whatever; there is only a certain relation, and most of the pleasure taken in the relation is purely imaginary. I refer to one's saying: This is my house; this is my slave; this money is mine; these are my soldiers. For if he considers his own individual self, he will find that all this is outside his self and that each of these possessions subsists as it is by itself. Therefore when the relation referred to has been abolished, there is no difference between an individual who has been a great king and the most contemptible of men, though nothing may have changed in any of the things that were attributed to him. The philosophers have explained that the endeavour and the efforts directed by man toward this kind of perfection are nothing but an effort with a view to something purely imaginary, to a thing that has no permanence. And even if these possessions should remain with him permanently during the whole of his life, he would by no means thereby achieve perfection in his self.

The second species has a greater connection than the first with the individual's self, being the perfection of the bodily constitution and shape – I refer to that individual's temperament being most harmonious, his limbs well proportioned and strong as they ought to be. Neither should this species of perfection be taken as an end, for it is a corporeal perfection and does not belong to man qua man, but qua animal; for man has this in common with the lowest animals. Moreover even if the strength of a human individual reached its greatest maximum,³⁵ it would not attain the strength of a strong mule, and still less the strength of a lion or an elephant. The end of this perfection consists, as we have mentioned, in man's transporting a heavy burden or breaking a thick bone and in other things of this kind, from which no great utility for the body may be derived. Utility for the soul is absent from this species of perfection.

The third species is a perfection that to a greater extent than the second species subsists in the individual's self. This is the perfection of the moral virtues. It consists in the individual's moral habits having attained their ultimate excellence.³⁶ Most of the commandments serve no other end than the attainment of this species of perfection. But this species of perfection is likewise a preparation for something else and not an end in itself. For all moral habits are concerned with what occurs between a human individual and someone else. This perfection regarding moral habits is, as it were, only the disposition to be useful to people; consequently it is an instrument for someone else. For if you suppose a human individual is alone, acting on no one, you will find that all his moral virtues are in vain and without employment and unneeded, and that they do not perfect the individual in anything; for he only needs them and they again become useful to him in regard to someone else.

The fourth species is the true human perfection; it consists in the acquisition of the rational virtues – I refer to the conception of intelligibles, which teach true

opinions concerning the divine things. This is in true reality the ultimate end; this is what gives the individual true perfection, a perfection belonging to him alone; and it gives him permanent perdurance; through it man is man. If you consider each of the three perfections mentioned before, you will find that they pertain to others than you, not to you, even though, according to the generally accepted opinion, they inevitably pertain both to you and to others. This ultimate perfection, however, pertains to you alone, no one else being associated in it with you in any way: *They shall be only thine own, and so on* (Prov. 5:17). Therefore you ought to desire to achieve this thing, which will remain permanently with you, and not weary and trouble yourself for the sake of others, O you who neglect your own soul so that its whiteness has turned into blackness through the corporeal faculties having gained dominion over it – as is said in the beginning of the poetical parables that have been coined for these notions; it said: *My mother's sons were incensed against me; they made me keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept* (Song of Songs 1:6). It says on this very same subject: *Lest thou give thy splendour unto others, and thy years unto the cruel* (Prov. 5:9).

The prophets too have explained to us and interpreted to us the selfsame notions – just as the philosophers have interpreted them – clearly stating to us that neither the perfection of possession nor the perfection of health nor the perfection of moral habits is a perfection of which one should be proud or that one should desire; the perfection of which one should be proud and that one should desire is knowledge of Him, may He be exalted, which is the true science. Jeremiah says concerning these four perfections: *Thus saith the Lord: Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth Me* (Jer. 9:22–3). Consider how he mentioned them according to the order given them in the opinion of the multitude. For the greatest perfection in their opinion is that of *the rich man in his riches*, below him *the mighty man in his might*, and below him *the wise man in his wisdom*. [By the expression ‘the wise man in his wisdom’, he means him who possesses the moral virtues; for such an individual is also held in high esteem by the multitude, to whom the discourse in question is addressed. Therefore these perfections are arranged in this order. The Sages, may their memory be blessed, apprehended from this verse the very notions we have mentioned and have explicitly stated that which I have explained to you in this chapter: namely, that the term ‘wisdom’ [*chokhmah*], used in an unrestricted sense and regarded as the end, means in every place the apprehension of Him, may He be exalted; that the possession of the treasures acquired, and competed for, by man and thought to be perfection are not a perfection; and that similarly all the actions prescribed by the Law – I refer to the various species of worship and also the moral habits that are useful to all people in their mutual dealings – that all this is not to be compared with this ultimate end and does not equal it, being but preparations made for the sake of this end. Hear verbatim a text of theirs dealing with all these notions; it is a text in *Bereshith Rabbah*. It is said there: ‘One scriptural dictum says: *And all things desirable are not to be compared unto her* (Prov. 8:11). Another scriptural dictum says: *And all things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her* (Prov. 3:15). The expression, *things desirable* refers to

commandments and good actions; while, *things thou canst desire*, refers to precious stone and pearls. Neither *things desirable* nor *things thou canst desire* are to be compared unto her, *but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth Me*.³⁷ Consider how concise is this saying, how perfect is he who said it, and how he left out nothing of all that we have mentioned and that we have interpreted and led up to at length.

As we have mentioned this verse and the wondrous notions contained in it, and as we have mentioned the saying of the Sages, *may their memory be blessed*, about it, we will complete the exposition of what it includes. For when explaining in this *verse* the noblest ends, he does not limit them only to the apprehension of Him, may He be exalted. For if this were his purpose, he would have said: *But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth Me*, and have stopped there; or he would have said: *that he understandeth and knoweth Me that I am One*; or he would have said: *that I have no figure*, or *that there is none like Me*, or something similar. But he says that one should glory in the apprehension of Myself and in the knowledge of My attributes, by which he means His actions, as we have made clear³⁸ with reference to its dictum *Show me now Thy ways and so on* (Exod. 33:13). In this *verse*³⁹ he makes it clear to us that those actions that ought to be known and imitated are *loving-kindness, judgement and righteousness*. He adds another corroborative notion through saying, *in the earth* – this being a pivot of the Law. For matters are not as the overbold opine who think that His providence, may He be exalted, terminates at the sphere of the moon and that the earth and that which is in it are neglected: *The Lord hath forsaken the earth* (Ezek. 9:9). Rather is it as has been made clear to us by the Master of those who know: *That the earth is the Lord's* (Exod. 9:29). He means to say that His providence also extends over the earth in the way that corresponds to what the latter is, just as His providence extends over the heavens⁴⁰ in the way that corresponds to what they are. This is what he says: *That I am the Lord who exercise loving-kindness, judgement, and righteousness, in the earth*. Then he completes the notion by saying: *For in these things I delight, saith the Lord* (Jer. 9:23). He means that it is My purpose that there should come from you *loving-kindness, righteousness and judgement in the earth* in the way we have explained⁴¹ with regard to the thirteen attributes: namely, that the purpose should be assimilation to them and that this should be our way of life. Thus the end that he sets forth in this *verse* may be stated as follows: it is clear that the perfection of man that may truly be gloried in is the one acquired by him who has achieved, in a measure corresponding to his capacity, apprehension of Him, may He be exalted, and who knows His providence extending over His creatures as manifested in the act of bringing them into being and in their governance as it is. The way of life of such an individual, after he has achieved this apprehension, will always have in view loving-kindness, righteousness and judgement, through assimilation to His actions, may He be exalted, just as we have explained several times in this Treatise.

This is the extent of what I thought fit that we should set down in this Treatise; it is a part of what I consider very useful to those like you. I hope for you that through sufficient reflection you will grasp all the intentions I have included therein, with the help of God, may He be exalted; and that He will grant us *and all [the*

people of] Israel, being fellows, that which He has promised us: *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped* (Isa. 35:5). *The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; they that dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined* (Isa. 9:1).

AMEN

Notes to Section 14

- 1 Cf. Mekhilta Beshalach, Shirah, 4.
- 2 B.T. Chagigah 15a.
- 3 Based on B.T. Berakhot 31b.
- 4 The names of the angels listed here are drawn from Ezek. 1:15; Isa. 33:7; Ezek. 1:4; Isa. 6:2; Gen. 16:7; Gen. 32:28; Job 1:6; Gen. 3:24; Josh. 5:13. Maimonides identifies the ten biblical angels with the ten pure forms of his philosophical cosmology.
- 5 Based on B.T. Chagigah 15a.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Heb. *de'ot*. The corresponding term in Maimonides' Arabic is *akhlāq*. The term 'ethical' is used here in its etymological sense: pertaining to character. Ethical dispositions are settled psychic states that generate the emotional responses from which a person's typical behaviour patterns flow. Other terms that have been used to translate *de'ot* are 'psychological characteristics' and 'character traits'.
- 8 M. Avot 4:4.
- 9 B.T. Sotah 4b.
- 10 Ibid., 5b.
- 11 B.T. Pesachim 66b.
- 12 Ibid., 113b.
- 13 M. Avot 1:17.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid., 3:13.
- 16 *Ahl al-bātin*. In Arabic *bātin* may mean 'the internal sense'. The *Ismā'īlī* and similar sects are often designated as *ahl al-bātin*. An allegorical interpretation of the Qur'ān was part of their faith.
- 17 Cf. II:13. Trans. Pines, 282–4.
- 18 I.e., if he wished us to accomplish the commandments and not to transgress the prohibitions.
- 19 I.e., the affirmation of the eternity of the world a parte ante.
- 20 Or: incoherent.
- 21 Cf. I Sam. 25:29. According to the commentators, these words refer to eternal life.
- 22 B.T. Chagigah 15a.
- 23 Or: there are those.
- 24 Cf. II:45. Trans. Pines, 395–403.
- 25 Literally: in his mouth.
- 26 Cf. I:39 and III:28.
- 27 I.e., the intellect.
- 28 B.T. Shabbat 149a.
- 29 [I.e., of the Eighteen Benedictions, the main prayer of the liturgy.]
- 30 I.e., not only of the Torah.
- 31 Cf. I:13, II:32, III:51 above.
- 32 The Hebrew expression translated *for ever* may also mean *for the world*.
- 33 Cf. e.g., III:12.
- 34 Or: mutually destroy each other.
- 35 Literally: finality and end.
- 36 The Arabic word *faḍīla*, translated 'excellence', is the singular of the word translated in the preceding sentence as 'virtues'.

- 37 Genesis Rabbah, XXXV *in fine*.
38 Cf. I:54.
39 Jer. 9:23 is referred to.
40 In the singular in Arabic.
41 Cf. I:54.