

**CHANGES IN TIME VS. TIMELESS CHANGE:
THE UNCHANGING AND ITS EMANATIONS**

***The Difference Between the Concept of Change in Proposition VII in the Introduction to Book II of
The Guide of the Perplexed, and the Concept of Change in Guide 2:12***

by Scott Michael Alexander

Proposition VII, of the 26 Aristotelian propositions formulated by Maimonides in the *Introduction* to Book II of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, states, as follows:

“Everything changeable is divisible, hence everything that moves is divisible, and consequently corporeal. But that which is indivisible cannot move, and cannot therefore be corporeal.”
(שכל משתנה מתחלק, ולפיכך כל נע מתחלק והוא גוף בהחלט. וכל אשר לא יתחלק אינו נע, ולפיכך לא יהיה גוף כלל.)

Some variant of the word *division* is employed here three times; of *motion* two times; *matter* two times; but, surprisingly, *change*, “the changeable,” משתנה, which this proposition is about, is only used once.

The first half of the proposition is positive in its voicing, while the latter half is negative in its voicing.

The outcome of this analysis, when we compare the two halves of the proposition, and especially noticing that the word “change” was only used in the first half, is that though we learned that all change is divisible, we don’t learn, as we would expect to learn, what that would mean if you negated the terms. For while you do hear that the changeable, the movable, and matter are divisible, and you also hear in the second part that anything which is *not in motion* and *not corporeal* would also *not be divisible*, you hear nothing about that which is *unchangeable*, or whether that would also not be divisible.

If everything that changes is divisible, then that should negate to *anything that is not changing is not divisible*. That would be true of some entities that don’t change, like God, the intelligences, and angels. But what about forms, and what about formal change? Forms are conceptual entities, and incorporeal, but, in our world, when matter acquires a new form, the forms pass from potential existence to actual existence in no-time. Are they unchanging, like the Platonic forms, or does this transition constitute a change? Even if we regard the forms as unchanging, wouldn’t the formal transition from a state of potential existence to a state of actual existence mark a real division? One might conclude that Maimonides’ failure to include the unchangeable in the second half of Proposition VII means that the forms themselves might be unchanging even though their action is divisible.

Formal Change Occurs without Motion

But Maimonides, in Guide 2:12, says that there is no motion when formal transitions take place:

“All combinations of the elements... come-to-be gradually (in time). It is different with forms: they do not come-to-be gradually, and, are, therefore, without motion,”
(שכל מיזוג...מתחדש ראשון ראשון, ואין הצורות כן, לפי שאינן מתחדשים ראשון ראשון, ולפיכך אין תנועת בה.)

In his Hebrew translation and commentary on 2:12, R. Kafih explains this motionlessness of forms in the following terms (page 188, note 18, my trans.): “...They don’t have a connection with time... and so cannot suffer division.” Maimonides refuses to call these things that come-to-be “changes” or “motions.”

It is worth noting that in 2:12 Maimonides also doesn't mention formal transitions from potentiality to actuality, as he did in Proposition V. In Proposition V he wrote that "All motion is change, and transition from potentiality to actuality" (שכל תנועה שינוי ויציאה מן הכוח אל הפועל). When he ruled there that "All motion is change...", שכל תנועה שינוי, he left the implication that the terms would be definitionally convertible (although the commentators and translators resist this convertibility), i.e., that all *change is motion*. Proposition V also says, in its second clause, that motion is "A transition from potentiality to actuality," ויציאה מן הכוח אל הפועל, a type of transition that *he does not mention at all* in Guide 2:12, where you might have expected it. This forces the conclusion that he did not mean to mention such transitions with the incorporeal occurrences that he discusses in 2:12.

In Guide 2:12, Maimonides pushed the boundaries he there marked out, when he proceeds to distinguish things that are corporeal but unique in their corporeality, i.e., the celestial spheres and the stars carried by their revolutions:

"... The stars, being corporeal, only act at certain [relative/ויחסם] distances, i.e., at a smaller or greater distance from the center [ie, the Earth], or at a definite distance from each other, a circumstance which led to the development of astrology [Friedlander, n. 2, p. 60: 'literally: and from this observation{that the stars act differently at different distances from each other} people came to the belief in the judgments of the stars.']."

(ולפיכך פועלים הכוכבים במרחק מסוים, כלומר: קרבתם למרכז וריחוקם ממנו ויחסם זה לזה, ומכאן נכנסו למשפטי הכוכבים.)

Those changes take place at different physical distances, like the effect of the spheres on the tides. They cause changes which *are* motions. But, by contrast, astrology is the sort of thing that he had said several sentences previously was:

"...The work of the imagination, which is, in fact, identical with the *yetzer hara*, the evil inclination...But this is *not the subject of this chapter*, in which we only intended to explain the term *influence* [emanation] insofar as it is applied to incorporeal beings, namely to God and to the intelligences, or to the angels. But the term is also applied to the forces of the spheres in their *effects* on the earth."

In this translation, Rabbi Dr. Michael Friedländer was careful to distinguish the relational "effects" of the spheres, like tidal effects, from incorporeal "influences," i.e. emanations, שפעות, stemming from the intelligences that animate the spheres. Those emanations do not act in accord with any supposed relational distance. In the first case, that of the effects of the activity of the corporeal spheres, tides are changes, and those changes are, indeed, motions, because they have to do with action over "distances." But the emanations are influences, which are entirely incorporeal, and, therefore do not result in physical effects. They are not motions.

The point about astrology and the "judgments of the stars" comes to underscore the confusion caused by the *yetzer hara* of the imagination to the many led astray by astrology, who conflate the incorporeal emanations with the physical effects of the changing planetary distances, such that they believed that by metrically charting those zodiacal positions, they could predict the changes brought about by the emanations. This is a classic category mistake.

Those emanatory changes come from the "higher worlds," at the level of what Jewish esotericism calls the *Olam ha-Yetzirot*, and possibly of more elevated worlds. They are not motions from our world, the *Olam ha-Asiya*, though they do affect us. Emanatory occurrences take place entirely on the incorporeal level of the relationships, so to speak, obtaining within and among the intelligences.

The Doctrine of the Higher Worlds

The Yetziratic world is understood to be world of formation, of the creation of universal form and universal matter; above it are the worlds of *Atzilut* and *Beri'a*, which represent the divine world “before” and “after” creation *ex nihilo* is conceptualized. The Asiatic world, the world of “making,” by contrast, is the world of the in-formation of the universal forms of created things in our material world. The four worlds pervade each other as they pervade our material world.

I find this doctrine of the Four Worlds to be a useful conceptual framework to locate Maimonides’ distinction between the changes in Proposition VII, and the changes in Guide 2:12. I am aware that this approach could be criticized for its apparent anachronism, but I accept that this 13th Century schema merely formalizes earlier thinking. (For a brief history of the concept, whose roots are old, see Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*, Keter Publ. 1974, p. 118, *et seq.*; his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Schocken, 1974, 117, 272; and his article “The Four Worlds” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, where Scholem explains that scholars in Maimonides’ time were aware of the general concept, and particularly of the existence of three of those worlds, from Isaiah 43:7, the worlds of *beri'a*, *yetzira*, and *asiya*, i.e., creation, formation, and making).

Proposition VII is about changes in our world, while *Guide* 2:12 is about changes in the upper worlds, which occur without motion, like the emanations, and the instantiation of human minds.

Thus, Maimonides’ remarkable conclusion to *Guide* 2:12, where he rhapsodizes:

“*In Thy light we see light*, expresses exactly what we have said [since we ‘see’ nothing visually as such], namely, by the influence of the intellect which emanates from Thee we become wise, and by it we are guided and enabled to comprehend the active intellect. Note this.”
(Whenever Maimonides says something like “Note this,” he means to direct us back to the lore of Jewish esotericism, which is further justification for referring to the concept of higher worlds.)

So, to tie this back to the wording of Proposition VII, when Maimonides asserts the divisibility of all changes, motions, and corporeal things, he is only talking about the *Olam ha-Asiya*, and, in fact, the *Olam ha-Asiya* is all he ever intended to talk about in his 26 Aristotelian Propositions. This is unlike in 2:12 where he explicitly said that he only intended to explain the term “influence,” *שפע*, insofar as it is applied to incorporeal beings, i.e., “God, the intelligences or the angels.” So, in the second half of Proposition VII, when he says that nonmoving and noncorporeal beings are indivisible, but purposely does not mention *unchanging* things, he clearly intends not to discuss any phenomena produced *above* the *Olam ha-Asiya*, which is, precisely, the higher world of the unchanging and the incorporeal, which he reserved to discuss only in Guide 2:12.

This would also explain why he treats the issue of change in two different ways in two non-consecutive chapters. This would be what I have called a “mild concealment,” halakhically justified by the fact that discussion of the action of the unchanging is obviously a discussion of *Maaseh Bereshit* and *Maaseh Merkava* (the mysteries of creation and providence) which the *Mishnah* in *Hagiga* ruled must not be discussed in a public forum, as Maimonides signaled when he wrote “Note this.” It is “mild concealment,” because he never meant to conceal his meaning from those who exert reasonable effort to understand. They should immediately recognize the absence of the *unchangeable* in the tight parallelism of Proposition VII but recognize it in chapter 12 of Book II.

Above our world, change in the unchanging can occur without divisibility. There is no motion in the higher worlds. However, in the lower world, there can be formal transition, that is, the actualization of

potentiality, in such things as the generation of new rabbits. Rabbit changes would be real changes in the potentialities of rabbit matter even though they occur in no-time. The agents that instantiate those forms are, as he says in 2:12, the incorporeal indivisible forms themselves (כי ופועל הצורה דבר שאינו סובל חלוקה, והפועל הזה אשר אינו גוף (פעולתו ממינו. ולפיכך ברור כי פועל הצורה, כלומר: נותנה צורה בהחלט, והיא נבדלת, והפועל הזה אשר אינו גוף). For that reason Maimonides hesitated to call those transitions “changes,” even though they do mark a transition from potentiality to actuality, and, consequently, a division between those two states. He calls this action a “*preference* accorded by this agent,” (Pines translation, following the Judeo-Arabic original: כִּן אִיתְּאָרָה (למא יות'רה). They merely “prefer” one of the potential ways that matter can be actualized, and, by making that preference they effectively actualize it. The forms themselves do not change and are indivisible, but when they newly in-form matter a transition takes place, though it is a transition that occurs in no-time. This is “change” in the unchanging. These kinds of transitions are the subject of Proposition VII, which is the causation of physical movement and change in our world.

With human souls, this type of formation, really instantiation, comes about without any change or division, without even the actualization of potentiality. This could also be spoken of as “change” in the unchanging, but really it occurs without divisibility. R. Isaac ben Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov (15th C.) holds that occurrences take place in our unchanging indivisible intellect in no-time. Mohamet Altabrizi concurs (13th C., earliest commentator on Maimonides’ 26 propositions): Proposition VII deals only with physical qualities, which are divisible. It does not deal with instantiations of the soul and the mind, which are indivisible, and are “changes” in the unchangeable, which Maimonides reserved for discussion only in Guide 2:12 (Wolfson, *Crescas Critique of Aristotle*, Harvard, 1929, p. 549).

R. Hasdai Crescas’ Question

This should resolve a problem that R. Hasdai Crescas (c. 1340-1410) raised with Proposition VII (Wolfson, *Crescas*, 243). Maimonides did not intend that the 26 Aristotelian Propositions would stand alone as an academic exercise. He uses them to prove the existence of God, and that God causes the motions of the universe. Specifically, in Guide 2:1, Maimonides uses Proposition VII to show that since God is immovable, He must also be unchangeable and indivisible. But if Maimonides did not intend to discuss the unchangeable in Proposition VII, how could he use that proposition to show that Uncaused First Cause of motion is free of change?

If all that Proposition VII shows is that changing things must always be divisible, how could it possibly account for these unchanging changes that R. Crescas listed:

“The rational soul’s...acquisition of intellectual conceptions out of sensible perceptions and forms of the imagination, a change which is in no-time. Likewise, the motions of the soul, like pleasure and care, imply a change which is in time [and yet the soul is indivisible],” (Wolfson’s trans. of Crescas’, and Wolfson’s brackets, *Crescas* p. 247)

R. Crescas proposed that the Proposition must be of *particular* and not *general* application, in that Proposition VII only applies to things that change over time. But God does not change over time. And so, he argued, it should not be used to prove anything about God.

He used the wrong approach. In the conceptual framework of the doctrine of higher worlds, however, the problem dissolves. For, as I stated at the outset, if you were to negate Proposition VII to read that *anything unchanging is indivisible*, that would work to accurately describe God, particularly in His role as the Unmoved Mover of the world’s motions. It would not work to describe formal transitions in our world. In the world of motion, our world, we cannot explain how new forms are generated in matter, how He creates the world *ex nihilo*, how He instantiates our mind in this world, or how emanation works.

In our world, we can explain how God causes all motion to occur. We do this by going up the causal chains to show that they can only ultimately be explained by the divine will of the Unmoved Mover. The Unchangeable is, indeed, indivisible, non-moving and non-changing, and does engender the origin of physical movement in our world. It does this, in the ancient cosmological paradigm, by inspiring the animating intelligences of the spheres to make those spheres move.

But beyond this the explanatory power of Proposition VII stops. We may not, through negative conversion, interpret that proposition to explain the actualization of potential forms in matter, which occur in no-time, though they clearly reveal division between their potency and their act. The causal chains in our world prepare matter so that the form can be suddenly instantiated, but how that instantiation takes place in the presence of such preparation exceeds our powers of explanation. The proposition cannot explain how these transitions occur.

Thus, while it is true that the Unchanging can *will* physical occurrences in our world, including the commencement of causal chains, He still remains indivisible. We can, therefore, when discussing changes in the world of motion, negate and convert the first clause of Proposition VII to say *that anything unchangeable is indivisible*. But we cannot use that statement to explain the sudden instantiation of formal changes, which show division between a state of potentiality and a state of actualization. These unchanged changes are not “motions” and cannot be explained by Aristotelian causation theory. Such changes in no-time can only come from the worlds where we “see” light, “Thy light.”

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