GUIDE 2:13
CREATION OR ETERNITY?

Overview: Battle Lines Drawn Against Aristotle

> "There is, however, one proposition which we do not accept—namely, the proposition which affirms the Eternity of the Universe, but we will admit it *for the present*, because by doing so we shall be enabled clearly to demonstrate our own theory." (Guide 2:*Introduction*)

With this brief passage, Maimonides announced his plan for the Second Volume of the Guide of the Perplexed.

He had postponed his assault on Aristotle for thirteen chapters in order to "Clearly … demonstrate our own theory." In his *Introduction* to Volume Two, he summarized Aristotle's philosophy in 26 Propositions. He accepted the first 25 of them in order to prove God's *existence*, *unity*, and *incorporeality*, the first three necessary religious beliefs. Over the next 12 chapters he developed his critique of astronomy, while depicting the incorporeal forces of the cosmos in his angelology. In 2:11 and 2:12, he portrayed the divine system of *emanation* and how it works. These studies were necessary preparation for our chapter.

Maimonides' subtle suggestion above was that he would *return* to join battle against that final 26th Aristotelian Proposition, which stated that "Time and motion are eternal, always in actual existence." Our chapter, Guide of the Perplexed 2:13, is his return to that battlefield. Over the next twelve chapters, he will press his attack against Aristotle's Eternalism and in favor of the Creation of the world.

Maimonides recognized that Eternalism confined God to a universe He did not create. The Torah's God is, by contrast, *creative*, *transcendent*, and *free*. God is beyond and different from the universe He creates.

That is why he *amended* the *Fourth* of his *13 Fundamental Principles of Judaism*, the Principle of God's Eternal Precedence (*kadmut*), to include Creation *ex nihilo*. In our chapter, he explicitly connected this divine *Eternality* to *Creation*, laying the groundwork for making Creation an explicit part of that Fourth Principle.

HOW WAS THE BATTLEFIELD DIVIDED?

> "There are three opinions on the world's Eternity or Creation among people who believe in the existence of God." (My trans.)

Maimonides chopped down the possible responses to the question of the world's origin with two strokes.

He *first* removed atheists from the field. That included people like Democritus, Epicurus, and most modern academics. Having already shown that God exists in a series of powerful arguments in Guide 2:1, he had no reason to debate opinions already disproved. (*ayn toelet l'hazkhir hashkafot bnei adam asher banu divreihem al ysod sh'kvar hukhaha satirato*. See my chapter-essay to Guide 2:1).

The second division cut out the Platonic theories that the universe was brought forth by a demiurgic deity *from something*. Whatever that *something* was, whether called matter, potentiality, dimensionality, or space, it was *eternal*, which was enough to remove those theories from contention:

> "It is likewise useless to prove the correctness of the followers of the [Platonic] theory in asserting that the heavens are generated and corrupted, because they at the same time believe in the *Eternity* of the Universe, and so long as this theory is adopted, *it makes no difference* to us

> whether it is believed that the heavens are generated and corrupted, and that only their matter is eternal, or the heavens are held to be indestructible, in accordance with the view of Aristotle."

There was no reason to devote further space to them because Aristotle's account of Eternity was clearer and more coherent than that of the Platonists. His universe always existed and was never created.

What we have left is a "disjunctive" division: *Was the world Eternal* or *was it Created*?

Maimonides frequently used disjunctive arguments. By reducing all possible contending theories to the smallest number, he *proved* the one remaining by *disproving* the others.

This division defined the battleground between the Torah Opinion that the universe was created *ex nihilo*, and Aristotle's opinion that it has existed eternally.

This was not the only or even the most natural way in which *the question of origins* could have been asked. It could have been whether the universe came from nothing *or* came from something, *i.e*., between Creation *ex nihilo* or Creation *ex aliquo* [*i.e*., *ex materia*]. It could also have been asked whether God *eternally generates* the universe from Himself by means of emanation, the view of the Neoplatonized Aristotelians who followed Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (c. 870 –951). Each school framed the question differently.

Most proposals came from the Platonists and the neo-Platonists. That is why Maimonides devoted so many words to them. He rejected all the ways their opinion could be confused with the Torah opinion. Since their eternal matter was not clearly different from Aristotle's Eternalism, he removed them from the battlefield.

(**Quotations from Maimonides** are from Guide 2:13 in R. Michael Friedländer's translation, unless otherwise noted. Italics and enumeration added throughout this essay. Also, I have systematically altered several of R. Friedländer's formulations to reflect Maimonides actual words, specifically where R. Friedländer translates *khomer* or its pronominal referents as *substance* rather than *matter.* Also, where he has *genesis and destruction*, or some version of *transience*, I mostly altered to some variant of *generation and corruption*, which is both accurate for *hava nifsedet* and accepted philosophical terminology."**Hypothetical disjunctive syllogism**" *ha-hekashim ha-tnai'i ha-nekhalek.* Maimonides, *Treatise on Logic*, ch. 7, R. Israel Efros trans., p. 45; and in R. Efros' *Philosophical Terms in the Moreh Nebukim*, Columbia, 1924. "**Created"**: *khidusho*, as in R. Kafih, R. Ibn Tibon, R. Harizi, Michael Schwarz, Jud.Ar.: חדות'ה, not R. Even-Shmuel's *nithava*, *i.e.*, "generated," or, worse, Pines' "created in time." **al-Fārābī**: Maimonides returned to the Farabian Aristotelians, whom he called the *akharonim*, *i.e.*, "modern Aristotelians," as R. Friedländer translated it, in Guide 2:20. "**Each school had its own way of framing the question**": see Herbert Davidson *Proofs for Eternity, Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy*, Oxford, 1987).

THE FIRST OPINION: THE OPINION OF THE TORAH

> "First Theory.—Those who follow the Law of Moses, our Teacher, hold that the whole Universe, *i.e*., everything except God, has been brought by Him into existence *out of* [*complete and absolute*] *nonexistence* (*ha-heider ha-mukhlat v'hagamor*). In the beginning God *alone* (*levado*) existed, and nothing else; neither angels, nor spheres, nor the things that are contained within the spheres existed. He then [*brought forth-hamtzi*] *from nothing* [lit. *not-from-thing*], all existing things such as they are, by *His will and desire* (*b'kheftzo u'retzono*)."

Maimonides used two unusual phrases to prevent confusing the Torah's Creation *from nothing* with Platonic generation from *preexistent matter*, which the Platonists sometimes called *nothing*. He wrote that the universe was produced "*not-from-thing*" rather than the expected "from nothing." That formula was first proposed by R. Saadia Gaon (b. 882 CE) to exclude a thing "Which could be something and happens to be nothing" and is thus "Not *absolute* nothing but only *relative* nothing, and such relative nothing is matter." By saying *not-from-thing*, Arabic *lā min shai*, such a misinterpretation of creation from nothing would presumably be excluded.

Maimonides wrote, even more strongly, that God brought forth everything *from absolute and complete absence/privation*, *ha-heider ha-muchlat v'hagamor* [Jud.Ar. בעד אלעדם אלמחץ' אלמטל]. He did this out of concern that "The use of the preposition *from* in any formulation of the principle of Creation *ex nihilo* would be inappropriate (*ex* = from), since *from* usually implies the coming of something *from* something as *from matter*." This second formula prevented any such implication of his use of *from*. That was also why he used the term *alone*, *l'vado,* in the phrase: *In the beginning God alone (l'vado) existed*. The past tense in exist*ed* was also inappropriate, though stylistically unavoidable. Moreover, even "The term *after* would of course have to be purged of any implication of time, since time came into existence only with the creation of time." Clearly, whoever wished to read Maimonides' position on the origin of the universe as Creation *ex aliquo* (*from something*) rather than Creation *ex nihilo* willfully misinterpreted him.

[**Quotations** in the two previous paragraphs are from Harry Wolfson, "The Meaning of *Ex Nihilo* Creation in the Church Fathers, Arabic and Hebrew Philosophy and St. Thomas," v. 1, *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religio*n, p. 213-214. **"Not-from-thing"**: *lo m'davar* is R. Tibbon's *non-literal translation*. But Maimonides' actual Jud.Ar. **לא מן שי**, *lā min shai*, was the formula that R. Saadia devised. See esp. Efros, *Philosophical Terms*, in "Notes by Prof. Louis Ginzburg": "The literal translation of **שי לא מן שי** is: *davar* ***m'lo*** *davar*, but Tibbon wished to avoid ambiguities," p. 131. In his bilingual edition of the Guide, R. Kafiḥ gives the Arabic **לא מן שי** but also translates it *non-literally* into Hebrew as *min ha-ain*. "**Willfully misinterpreted**": See note on R. Kaspi near the end of this chapter-essay].

THE CRITIQUE OF TIME

> "In the beginning God alone existed, and nothing else; neither angels, nor spheres, nor the things that are contained within the spheres existed. He then [*brought forth-hamtzi*] from nothing all existing things such as they are, by His will and desire. Even *time* itself is among the things created; for time depends on motion, i.e., on an accident in things which move, and the things upon whose motion time depends are themselves created beings, *which have passed from nonexistence into existence* (*v'nihi'ei akher sh-lo haya*)."

Having established that the Jewish view was that the universe was created from nothing, Maimonides drew its implications. In creating the universe and everything in it God brought forth *time*, as the extreme example of how far His creation went. That is why he wrote, "*Even* time itself is among the things created," *gam ha-zman atzmo mklal ha-nivraim*, though we do not generally think of time as a created thing. Time is not a material substance like the other creations, yet it is incomprehensible except in relation to them.

The reason for this is that "Time depends on motion." In R. Kafih's translation, it is a *nisfakh* or *branch* of motion, suggesting an organic connection between the *moving thing* and *time*. (Jastrow, *Dictionary Of The Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi And Midrashic Literature*, p. 1013, 1903, Leipzig). Since those substances in motion are themselves created, it follows that time, which depends on their motion, is also created. That is precisely what Maimonides wrote in his definition of time in Aristotelian Proposition XV:

> "Time is an accident attached to motion, and one is never found without the other. Motion is only possible in time, and the intellect cannot conceive time except in connection with motion. Therefore, *things which do not move have no relation to time*."

The things that move are the created things of our world. The incorporeal entities do not move.

***The Problem of "Duration*."** Of course, the most important entity which does not move in any physical sense is God. Since time depends on motion, it has no relevance to God.

Nor could it have. That is one reason why Maimonides rejected any account of time except as the measure (metric) of a thing as it moves. But we cannot help talking about time loosely:

> "We say that God *existed* (*haya*) before the creation of the Universe, although the verb exist*ed* appears to imply the notion of time; we also believe that He *existed* an infinite space of time before the Universe was created; but in these cases, *we do not mean time in its true sense* (*lo amitat zman*). We only use the term to signify something *analogous or similar to time* [lit., *supposed/estimated time or imagined time – ha-shaarat zman o dimion zman*]. For time is undoubtedly an accident, and, according to our opinion, one of the created accidents, like blackness and whiteness."

If you say that God exist*ed* before Creation (i.e., before the Creation of time), do you not imply that God exists *with time*? However, here, once again, we are forced to use normal human language to express concepts in divine science (Guide 1:26). What can it mean to speak of divine existence *prior* to Creation, and even prior to the existence of time itself?

We seem to be able to imagine Creation in an infinite time by *casting back our thought*. This is *the problem of duration* (*meshekh*, *himashekhut*). Is this a kind of time? It was the cornerstone of Aristotle's Eternalism:

> "Then if it is impossible both that time be and that it be known without the *now*, while the now is a certain kind of middle thing, and *a thing which holds a beginning and an end together*, the beginning of the time that is *going to be* and the end of what *has gone past*, *it is necessary that there always be time*. For the extremity of the last time that is *taken* will be in some now (since there is nothing in time to *take* aside from the now), and so, since the now is a beginning and an end, *there must always be time on both sides of it*. But surely if there is time, it is clear that there is necessarily also motion, if time is some attribute of motion." Aristotle, *Physics*, 8:1, 252b21-29, Joe Sachs' trans., 190, Rutgers, 1995.

He argued that since you can always look back to a *before* from any *now*, there must *always* be a *before*. If there has *always* been a *before*, then there must be eternal time. And since, in the definition that both Aristotle and Maimonides share, time depends on the motion of a *moving substance*, Aristotle wrote: "*Surely if there is time… there is necessarily also motion*." In other words, because I can cast my mind back to any previous *before*, time and motion have always existed and will always exist, uncreated.

Rejecting this Eternalism, Maimonides argued that since every *moving substance* has been created, time also must have been created. Though you can imagine an infinite past such *duration* cannot be real. "We only use the term to signify *supposed* time or *imagined* time – *ha-shaarat zman o dimion zman* – not true time – *lo amitat zman*." Time has an objective definition: it is the *measure* of a moving object's motion as it passes from *before* to *after* (Aristotle, *Physics*, 4:11:219b1-2). That moving thing is a created thing.

Still, it is hard to avoid using time words. Maimonides, therefore, reminds us that such terms as "was," "existed," or "created," the language of *duration*, arose from imagination, not reality.

The Scholars' Inability to Grasp Time. Maimonides reported that scholars are perplexed about time. Why are they confused? He provided the answer but suggested that his explanation was a detour from his subject. I contend that Maimonidean "detours" are not tangential at all, but central:

> "The following remark *does not form an essential part of our present research*; it will nevertheless be found useful in the course of this discussion. Many scholars (*baalei ha-mada*) do not

> know what time really is, and men like Galen were so perplexed about it that they asked whether time has a real existence or not." (Claudius Galenus, famous Hellenistic physician and scholar, 129 – c. 216 CE.)

We first note Maimonides' four reasons for why the scholars do not understand time:

A) It's hard, but not impossible, to understand *accidents on accidents*, like the *curvature* of a line, the *brightness* of a color, or the *time* of a moving object.

B) Time is unique among those second-order accidents since it is the metric of a *moving* substance. Just because of that, it is *unstable*. It does not remain in one state. That renders time problematic for us even now.

C) There is an ineradicable element of *mind* and *consciousness* in the determination of time.

D) Maimonides accepted Aristotle's definition of time as the metric of the motion of a moving substance, but with one adjustment that Aristotle could not accept. *Everything about time is created by God*. "We consider time a thing created." Time only emerges in a created world.

This last is the real problem Maimonides has with the scholars. The fact that time is difficult to understand would not make it a religious problem. The philosophers' assertion of *eternal uncreated* time, however, led them not only to perplexity but also to fundamental misconceptions about God.

Maimonides had reason to imply that this passage was a tangent. As he wrote in Guide 2:30, some Rabbis in the Midrash seemed to have adopted this concept of *duration* and the Eternalism it implied. Maimonides chose, however, to make Galen and "the scholars" his target *here* rather than the sages of the Midrash.

(**Tangential?** The entire passage is 188 words in R. Kafih's Hebrew, 186 in the Judeo-Arabic, so nearly a page of the 6-and-a-half-page treatment of Guide 2:13 in his bilingual edition. That is no small thing. **Rabbinic Eternalism**: see section below "Midrashic Problems with Time.")

Time's Unstable Secondary Accidentality. Among the accidents, both Maimonides and Aristotle recognized that there can be *first-order accidents* (as L. E. Goodman called them in his translation, Stanford, 2026). But there are also what Maimonides termed *accidents on accidents* (*mikrei b'mikrei*). He called the first-order accidents "*qualities*," and as his example he mentioned the colors black and white. *Qualities* can be understood and recognized at first glance, as, *e.g.*, a black or a white fencepost. Color and taste are qualities that all things have. What makes time different from color and taste? He gave us two reasons here:

> "The reason for this uncertainty (opacity, obscurity, hiddenness—*sh'neelam*), is to be found in the circumstance that 1) Time is an *accident* of an *accident* (*mikrei b'mikrei*). Accidents which are *directly connected* with material bodies, *e.g.*, color and taste, are easily understood, and correct notions are formed of them. There are, however, *accidents which are connected with other accidents*, *e.g.*, the splendor of color, or the inclination and curvature of a line: of these *it is very difficult* to form a correct notion, especially 2) When the accident which forms the substratum for the other accident *is not constant* but variable (*ha-mikrei ha-nosei bilti nakh b'matzavo, ki im b'matzav akher matzav*). *Both difficulties are present in the notion of time* (*v'hinei n'k'batzu b'zman shnei ha-davarim yakhad*): it is an accident of motion, which is itself an accident of a moving object; besides, it is not a fixed property; on the contrary, its true and essential condition is *not to remain in the same state for two consecutive moments*. This is the source of *ignorance* (*sh'ye'alem*) about the nature of time."

Time is not a *direct* accident like the color of a fence post, but an *accident on an accident*. Such second-order accidents are not rare. Maimonides provided two examples: the *brightness* of a color, and the *curvature* of a line. They are hard to explain, but not impossible to grasp. The real problem is that time is the accident of the motion of a *moving* physical substance, moving from *before* to *after*. In his commentary, R. Yehuda Even-Shmuel explained what is at stake:

> "Particularly obscure for us is the apprehension of an 'accident of an accident' if the accident abides with an accident (*ha-mikre ha-nosei*) that is not constant*, which doesn't remain while we observe it in a single state* (*inyan*), but passes from state to state, changing every moment from what it had been a moment before." (*Commentary*, *ad loc*., my trans.)

While the *color* of a fixed fence post is obvious, it is difficult to measure the *time* that a dislodged fence post travels downstream:

> "For time is undoubtedly an accident, according to our opinion, one of the created accidents, like blackness and whiteness; [time] is not a *quality*, but an accident connected with motion."

A *quality* is "An *accident* intrinsically completing and perfecting a *substance* either in its being or in its operation." (B. Wuellner, *Dict. of Scholastic Philosophy*, 103). It is a first-order accident, like whiteness or blackness.

The rule is that *substances* can exist on their own, but *accidents* cannot exist apart from substance. But how do we explain the secondary *accident* of *time*, where the underlying accident of its motion is itself inherently unstable? Improved means of measuring these states in modern physics do not eliminate their perplexities.

(Aharonov and Bohm, "Time in the Quantum Theory and the Uncertainty Relation for Time and Energy," Physical Review 122 [1961]: 1649–1658; Mandelshtam and Tamm "The Uncertainty Relation Between Energy and Time in Non-relativistic Quantum Mechanics" in I.E. Tamm *Selected Papers* (1945); Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy*, chapters 3 and 9, generally).

Still, Maimonides would disagree with Galen and others who did not think that time had a *real* existence. This is for two reasons. Time has universal application: the time it took to move my fence post can be recorded and accounted for in both Dallas and Beijing. Secondly, the moving thing, *e.g.*, my fence post, is as real as can be for those who do not entirely reject sense data.

There is one last element in time's definition that makes it perplexing. Time measures the motion of a thing from *before* it began to *after* it concludes. But only the *mind* can assign the "before" or the "after" to time. Anteriority and posteriority are both mental determinations. (Aristotle, *Physics*, 219b1 *et. seq*.).

This does not, however, make time's existence merely *nominal* for Maimonides. The phenomenon of time is real. Its perplexity, however, made it a problem for religion.

Midrashic Problems with Time. Ignorance and confusion about time's *unstable secondary accidentality* can mislead religious observers. Consider this passage in Midrash *Bereshit Rabba* 3:7:

> "Rabbi Yehuda bar Simon (סימון) said: 'It *will be* evening,' *yehi erev*, is not written here, but rather, 'It *was* evening,' *va-yehi erev*. *Hence we learn that the divisions of time have existed previously*.
>
> {*Sefaria* Editor's note: *There had been an order to time even beforehand*, i.e., even before the fourth day, the day of the creation of the sun and the moon, the conventional means of marking time.}

> Rabbi Abahu said: 'This teaches that He continuously created worlds and destroyed them, until He created the current one, and said: '*This* one pleases Me, *those* did not please Me.'
> Rabbi Pinḥas said: 'The source for Rabbi Abahu is: '*God saw everything that He had made, and <u>behold</u>, it was very good*' (Genesis 1:31) – *This* pleases Me, *those* did not please Me.
> {The extra term '*Behold*' implied a new, improved situation that had not been there before}."
> (The Sefaria *Midrash Rabba*, 2022, with interpolated comments by its editors).

Maimonides does not view this passage favorably. He reacted sharply in Guide 2:30:

> "We find that some of our Sages are reported to have held the opinion that time existed before the Creation. But this report is very doubtful, because the theory that *time cannot be imagined with a beginning*, as taught by Aristotle, as I showed you, is *objectionable*.
>
> "Those who have made this assertion have been led to it by a saying of one of our Sages in reference to the terms 'one day,' 'a second day.' Taking these terms literally, the author asked, what determined 'the first day,' since there was no rotating sphere, and no sun? …R. Jehudah, son of R. Simon, said: 'Hence we learn that the *divisions of time have existed previously.*'
>
> "R. Abahu said, 'Hence we learn that God created worlds and destroyed them.' *This latter exposition is still worse than the former*. Consider the difficulty [of] these Rabbis ….who thus adopted the theory of the Eternity of the Universe. *Every religious man rejects this*….In short, in these questions, *do not take notice of the utterances of any person*. I told you [in Guide 2:13!] that the *foundation of our faith* is the belief that God *created* the Universe from nothing; that time did not exist previously but was *created*: for it depends on the motion of the sphere, and the sphere has been *created*." (Guide 2:30)

Maimonides made Creation a Torah *foundation* in our chapter and later in his *Amended* 13 *Principles of Judaism* (4th Principle, *Amended*; see the last section and the ms. digitized photo *plate* on the last page of this chapter-essay). It was also one of the four requirements that any serious religious believer, Gentile or Jew, must admit. Major commentators followed him, including R. Efodi (*c*. 1350 – *c*. 1415) and R. Asher Crescas (1st half of 15th C.).

<u>Rabbi Yosef Albo on "Duration.</u>" R. Yosef Albo (c. 1380 – c. 1444) also believed in Creation, but objected to making it a *Principle* of Judaism. It was a "branch (*anaf*)" *deriving* from God's existence and perfection. He defended R. Yehuda bar Simon in the Midrash:

First, R. Yehuda bar Simon should not be considered an Eternalist since he had actually thought that "the sphere" was created on the first day, not the fourth day. ("*God began to create heaven and earth, the earth being unformed and void, and there was evening and there was morning, one day*"). Thus, even without the sun and moon to act as natural clocks, there was still evening and morning since the rotating sphere had already been created. (*Ikkarim* 2:18). R. Albo followed R. Ibn Ezra (1089/92-1164/67), who wrote: "*One day* refers to the movement of the sphere."

R. Albo also argued that there were two kinds of time. He called the first *seder ha-zmanim* – "*the order of time*" (the term used in the Midrash), and the second *zman stam*— "vague or indefinite time," *i.e*., *duration.* He admitted that some Sages believed in *infinite* duration*,* which would account for the claims of R. Abahu or R. Pinḥas, but that this duration is only *imagined*, following Maimonides. R. Albo wrote that this *unmeasured duration* (*he-hameshekh ha-bilti m'shuar*), unlike objectively real time measured by the motion of the sphere, is:

> "Conceived *only* in thought, though existing always, both before the creation of the world and after its cessation, but without *the order* apparent from the motion of the sphere… Our rabbis

> are of the opinion that time in the abstract [i.e., abstracted from motion] is such a *duration*.… According to this, there are two species of time: one is numbered and *measured* by the *motion* of the sphere, to which the terms *prior* and *posterior*, equal and unequal, apply. The other is not numbered or measured, but is a *duration* existing prior to the sphere, to which the words equal and unequal do not apply. This is what Maimonides calls *imagination of time*. This may be perpetual." (*Ikkarim* 2:18, JPS 1929, in Sefaria).

R. Albo explained that this *duration* is what the Sages meant in their *Hagiga* 11b ruling: "*One must not ask what is before and what is behind*." He did not condemn the Rabbis who believed in such imagined duration, though he implied that they may have strayed beyond what could be publicly discussed. He argued that if they had indeed accepted Eternalism, "The meaning of divine *priority* in eternity (*kadmut*) would be that God is [logically, not temporally] *prior* to all existing things and *prior to time* which is numbered by the motion of the sphere." The divine creative acts occur in a duration beyond the bounds of objective time.

Bergsonian "Duration." In modern times, the philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941) adopted this *duration*, but in a different way than Rabbi Albo. Bergson followed Augustine, Kant, and Schopenhauer, who sought to free the mind from the mechanical, utilitarian, and materialist structures of time. In his *duration* "Several conscious states are organized into a whole, permeate one another, [and] gradually gain richer content" (*Time and Free Will*, p. 122). He saw time as a thick present, as in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, where events are not marshaled in rigorous consecutive *order* but carry the weight that the mind assigns them. (Proust was the best man at Bergson's wedding to Proust's cousin).

It's how skydiving *seems* to take much longer than the actual clock time that has passed. In Bergson's case of a flock of sheep, we do not ignore the *beauty* of the pasture in which they are feeding or the fact that *the sheep are not identical to each other*. Our *aesthetic* focus is not what they have in *common*. When, on the contrary, we are interested, for *commercial* purposes, in the total number of sheep for meat or wool production, he calls that *quantitative multiplicity* as opposed to *qualitative multiplicity* or *Durée.* Only through intuition can its quality be known. (Though even the "multiplicity" in the latter formulation seems innappropriate).

Unlike the duration of the Midrashic sages, Bergson's *durée* is not Eternalist; indeed, Eternalism is irrelevant. Perhaps Maimonides meant something like this when he does not merely call this experience *imaginary time* (*dimion zman*), but also "*estimation*" *of time* (*hashaarat zman*). Similarly, in Maimonides' account of prophecy, if a prophetic event occurred, we should read its entire scriptural chapter as having taken place in *prophecy*, as an atemporal duration in the prophetic *now* (Guide 2:42). This could also reflect his view of meditation. (**Hitbodedut**: See Guide 1:8, 14, 18, 25, 39 and my chapter-essays on them, with 3:32, and 3:51).

Don't Be Trapped*!*

> "We consider time a *thing created* (*davar nivra*): it comes into existence in the same manner as other accidents and the substances that bear those accidents. For this reason, *viz*., because time belongs to the things created, it cannot be said that God produced the Universe *in a temporal beginning* (*b'hatkhala zmanit*). *Consider this well*; for he who does not understand it is *unable to refute forcible objections* raised against the theory of Creatio *ex nihilo* (*k'dei sh'lo ykhayevukh hateshuvot asher ain miflat mehen*, i.e., you will not be able to escape from them). If you admit the existence of time before the Creation, you will be *compelled* (*nitkhayevet*) to accept the theory of the Eternity of the Universe. For time is an accident and requires a substratum (*nosei*). You will therefore have to assume that something (besides God) existed before this Universe was created, *an assumption which it is our duty to oppose* (*u'm'zei hi ha'brikha*—lit., *from this one must flee*)."

Maimonides added to Aristotle's definition of time as the *metric of the motion of a moving thing* that the thing in motion is *created* and, therefore, *time is created*. This reduced time to a *third-order* creation, massively downgrading its significance, bringing it down to earth. Greek culture made time a god: *Chronos* personified time. This *Chronos* sometimes became the similarly named *Kronos*, the Titan father of Zeus. The physician Galen had even thought that since time was a divine thing it was incomprehensible (Guide 1:73, Prop. III).

Where, above, R. Friedländer translated: "If you admit the existence of time before the Creation, you will be compelled to accept the theory of the Eternity of the Universe," Lenn Goodman translated "For if you posit a time before creation, you will be *trapped* in Eternalism." *By conceding the eternity of time you renounce Creation*. Maimonides wants us to remember that this accident of time is *created*. Goodman concluded his translation of that paragraph: "*This is how to avoid that trap.*" By always *recalling* that time is created, we avoid being trapped by the Eternalists' arguments.

<u>Abraham's Vision of Divine Creation</u>.

> "This is the First Theory [regarding Creation], and it is undoubtedly a fundamental principle of the Law of our teacher Moses; it is next in importance to the principle of God's unity. *Do not follow any other theory* (*al yaalei b'livkha zulat zei*). Abraham, our father, *was the first that taught it*, after he had established it by *contemplation* (*ha-bio elei'a ha-iyun*). He proclaimed, therefore, 'In the Name of the Lord the God of the *universe* (*olam*)' (Gen. 21:33); and he had previously expressed this theory in the words, 'The *Possessor* (*konei*) of heaven and earth' (*ibid*. 14:22).

The Creation of the world follows from the Bible's first statement that "In the beginning God *created*." Maimonides explained, in Mishneh Torah, that Abraham was the first who taught it:

> "He had no teacher, nor was there anyone to inform him. Rather, he was mired in Ur Kasdim among the foolish idolaters. His father, mother, and all the people were idol worshipers, and he would worship with them. [However,] his heart was exploring and [gaining] understanding. Ultimately, he appreciated the way of truth and understood the path of righteousness through his accurate comprehension. *He realized that there was one God who controlled the sphere, that He created everything* (*bara hakol*)*, and that there is no other God ... He knew that the entire world was making a mistake*." (Mishneh Torah, *Avoda Zara* 1:3, Touger trans.)

Abraham first recognized the twin problems of Idolatry and Eternalism. "He knew that the entire world was making a mistake," since the Chaldeans did not know that "There was one God who controlled the sphere, that He *created* everything, and there is *no other* God." Abraham grasped that for the heavens to revolve, they must be moved by a Being of infinite and qualitatively different power than those heavens:

> "After this mighty man was weaned, he began to explore and think. Though he was a child, he began to think throughout the day and night, wondering: How is it possible for the sphere to continue to revolve without having anyone controlling it? Who is causing it to revolve? Surely, it does not cause itself to revolve!" (Mishneh Torah, *ibid.*)

R. Even-Shmuel recognized the meaning of Abraham's discovery. By affirming the Existence of God, Abraham simultaneously affirmed the creation of the world. Thus, *the recognition of divine Existence already entailed the recognition of divine Creation.*

> "*For when he declared the Existence of God, he also declared the Creation of the world*. He recognized God from his own knowledge through his faculty of meditation, since 'He had no master and no father taught him' (*Bereishit Rabba* 61:1)." (R. Even-Shmuel, *ad loc*., my trans.)

In our chapter, Maimonides recalled two accounts of Abraham's international relations. In the first, Abraham swore to keep a treaty; in the second, he swore to accept no worldly compensation for military service. In both cases, he swore not to any local fetish but to the "God of the universe (*olam*)" and to the God who is "The Owner of the heaven and the earth" (Gen. 21:33, 14:22). By *ownership*, Maimonides understood God as Creator, for who more than its creator can be considered the owner of a thing? More to the point, *olam* can be translated as either universe or eternity, i.e., as time. God is the Creator of time.

Abraham "*Was the first that taught*" that God is the Creator of the universe and of time. The old deities were *immanent* regional figures, i.e., gods of Babylonia, Lebanon, or Arabia, not of the universe. The God of Abraham, however, *transcends* the universe, since only He could have created it from *nothingness*.

The Torah Opinion Restated. At the end of our chapter Maimonides restated The Torah Opinion in ringing tones. The Torah upholds Divine Eternality, Exclusivity, and Creativity:

> "All who follow the Law of Moses, our Teacher, and Abraham, our Father, *and all who adopt similar theories* (*o mi sh'halakh b'drakham*, all who follow in their path, *i.e*., Muslims and Christians), assume that nothing is eternal except God (*sh'ain shum davar kadmon klall im hashem*), and that the theory of Creation *ex nihilo* includes *nothing that is impossible*."

There is no other eternal thing besides God. God's precedence/priority (*kadmut hashem*) is a negative priority in that nothing was prior to Him, not even non-existence (*Ikkarim* 2:18). Moreover, he added, Creation *ex nihilo* is not *impossible*, as the philosophers' had charged.

THE SECOND OPINION – THE PLATONISTS AND THE DOCTRINE OF IMPOSSIBILITY

> "Second Theory.—The theory of all Philosophers whose opinions and works are known to us is this: It is impossible to assume that God produced anything from *nothing*, or that He reduces anything to *nothing*; that is to say, it is impossible that an object consisting of matter and form should be produced when that matter is *absolutely absent* (*heider ha-mukhlat*), or that it should be destroyed in such a manner that that matter be absolutely no longer in existence."

The Second Opinion regarding Creation is that of the Platonists. Maimonides began his account of them with a lengthy *preface* in which he explained the *doctrine of impossibility*. This was no digression, since impossibility was the philosophers' weapon against the doctrine of Creation.

Why Should Anything be Impossible for God? He began by referring to "all the philosophers," including both Aristotelians and Platonists, who contended that Creation from nothing is impossible. Their famous motto was *ex nihilo nihil fit*, from nothing nothing comes.

Left unasked was the question on the minds of religious people: "Why should anything be impossible for God?" Maimonides left it unstated, although he did provide answers here and in Guide 3:15.

First, he defended the general doctrine of impossibility. In 3:15 he attacked opponents of the doctrine, especially the Kalām Muslim theologians for whom *nothing imaginable was impossible*. Focusing on those less

sensitive targets, he bypassed possible Jewish opponents. He wrote that there are things that *everyone* believes are impossible (apart from those "ignorant of logic," including the Kalām). Regarding the doctrine that we do not ascribe to God the impossible, he wrote: "No thinking man denies the truth of this maxim."

But how do we tell the impossible things from the possible? Was there a rule? What is impossibility?

The Law of Contradiction. We saw that Maimonides used unusual phrases to avoid confusing Creation *ex nihilo* with the Platonic generation from preexistent matter. He urged that there was *no eternal thing with* God from which a new thing could be drawn.

By why wouldn't creating *something from not-thing* violate *the law of contradiction*? Wouldn't it be a *definitional* violation? The listed impossibilities that he agreed with all destroy the meaning of the thing in question.

> "To say of God that He can produce a thing from nothing or reduce a thing to nothing is, according to the opinion of these philosophers, the same as if we were to say that He could cause 1) one substance to have at the same time two opposite properties, or 2) produce another being like Himself, or 3) change Himself into a body, or 4) produce a square the diagonal of which be equal to its side, or similar impossibilities."

The List of Impossibilities. In Guide 3:15 Maimonides expanded the list of impossibilities:

> "All philosophers consider that it is impossible for:
> 1) One substratum to have at the same moment two opposite properties,
> 2) Or for the elementary components of a thing, substance and accident, to interchange, so that the substance becomes accident, and the accident becomes substance, or
> 3) For a material substance to be without accident. Likewise,
> 4) It is impossible that God should produce a being like Himself, or
> 5) Annihilate,
> 6) Corporify, or
> 7) Change Himself. The power of God is not assumed to extend to any of these impossibilities."

He agreed with this list. These impossibilities destroy the definition of the thing in question. The first impossibility in both lists exemplified the point: a thing cannot have two opposite properties at one time. By "opposite properties," he meant anything attributed to a thing which would *negate its existence*, violating the *law of contradiction*. In logic, the *law of identity* states that A equals A, while the *law of contradiction* states that A does not equal not-A. The law states that for any given proposition, the proposition and its negation cannot be simultaneously true. A common example is that the proposition "The house is white" and its negation, "The house is not white," are mutually exclusive. (See my "*Introduction* II: *Contradictions*").

This also explains the entries which touch on God's nature. If God could create another like Himself, it would violate the Principle of Divine *Unity*. Likewise, God also cannot corporify Himself without violating Divine *Incorporeality*. God's unity and incorporeality are *implicit in His nature*. God could also not annihilate Himself because His existence is *Absolute*, *i.e.*, necessary. (See below, in the Third Opinion, regarding the Aristotelians' addition that God could not *change* Himself).

Both chapters listed an undoubted principle of geometry. In Guide 3:15, he wrote:

> "Again, whilst *philosophers* say that it is impossible to produce a square with a diagonal equal to one of the sides, or a solid angle that includes four right angles, or similar things, it is thought possible *by some persons who are ignorant of mathematics*, and who only know the words of these propositions, but have no idea of that which is expressed by them."

[The recognition that the diagonal of a square is both not equal to its side and incommensurate with it was probably established by Hippasus of Metapontum (c. 530 – c. 450 BCE), a Pythagorean, although Plato in *Theatetus* 147d seems to ascribe it to Theodorus of Cyrene (*c*. 400 BCE). In any event, the principle was already ancient by Euclid's time. There is hardly anything clearer in geometry. It is like the well-known impossibility of squaring the circle, first seen in Anaxagoras (*c.* 500 BCE – *c.* 428 BCE)].

Guide 3:15 also listed three impossibilities about *substance* and *accident*. The rule is that a *substance* can exist on its own, but an *accident* cannot exist unless attached to a substance. Additionally, a *physical substance* cannot exist without its accidents. A dog, for example, can exist on its own, but it is not a dog unless it manifests accidents of color, size, shape, *etc.* Similarly, no accident can become a substance or *vice versa*.

The earliest version of the Kalām, the *Mutazila*, argued that an *eternal self-subsisting accident* could exist. They contended that the sound of the word *kun*, the Arabic command to "*Be*!" could have a free-floating eternal existence until Allah would choose to create the world. This proposal defied the accepted rule that a sound must attach to a substance to exist (Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 2:8). Maimonides wrote in Guide 3:15:

> "But the existence of *accidents independent of substance* is possible according to one class of philosophers, the *Mutazilah*, whilst according to others it is impossible; it must, however, be added that those who admit the existence of an *accident independent of substance*, have not arrived at this conclusion by philosophical research alone: but it was *mainly by the desire to defend certain religious principles*, which speculation had greatly shaken, that they had recourse to this theory."

Maimonides' had argued that Islamic theology regularly violated the *Rule of Themistius*, that *we must not think that reality follows theory; rather, theory must follow reality.* The Kalām frequently made reality follow its *Qur'an*-derived theories, even thought they ruin real distinctions like that between substance and accident. (See Guide 1:71.Themistius: Roman statesman, rhetorician and philosopher: 317–c.388).

The Fixed Nature of the Impossible. When the philosophers say that God cannot do the impossible, does that not imply that God is *weak*, contradicting *divine omnipotence*? Philosophers denied the charge:

> "The philosophers thus believe that it is no defect in the Supreme Being that He does not produce impossibilities, for the *nature of that which is impossible is constant—it does not depend on the action of an agent*, and for this reason it cannot be changed. Similarly, there is, according to them, no defect in the greatness of God, when He is unable to produce a thing from nothing, because they consider this as one of the impossibilities."

If anything, with this reply, the philosophers could claim to be better defenders of God's perfect nature than the Jews. The Athenian philosophers had rejected the way that Homer and Hesiod (eighth century BCE) portrayed their gods' intrusions into human affairs, corporifying themselves and acting in disgusting ways. They sought a pure conception of the divine, even moving toward something vaguely like monotheism. (Actually *henotheism*, where one of the Olympian panoply ruled the rest.)

Thus, according to the philosophers, to suggest that God does impossible things would be to claim that He acts in *vain*, contradicting the truth that God never acts in vain. The reason is that *impossibility has a fixed nature*,

and, therefore, *cannot be actualized by any agent.* Impossibilities are not even potentially possible. They are not real potentialities. No agent, including God, could actualize them.

The fixed nature of the impossibilities means that they cannot be changed. You do not *choose* what is or is not impossible. Nor do they disappear. It is no weakness that God cannot realize them. No one can make a diagonal equal the side of the square, except in wispy imagination. Just as we must deny *divine attributes* (Guide 1:51-60), similarly, we must deny that God could change the nature of the impossible.

Is Creating Something From Nothing Impossible for God? The lingering question, however, is why creating *something from nothing* should be impossible for God. The proposition "Creation *ex nihilo*" admittedly scans as a violation of the law of contradiction as well as the definition of a *thing*. This is the point of the philosophers' maxim *ex nihilo nihil fit*, "From nothing nothing comes," or, to put in positive voice, *Everything must come from something else*. The alternative is impossible. Creation *not from thing* is impossible because the *thing* is a material substance, but *nothing* is not a material substance (*ha-yesh hu baal khomer, v'ha-ain aino baal khomer*). A *material thing* cannot come from *nothing* since *nothing* has *no matter*.

Maimonides will respond in coming chapters that what looks impossible in our grammar and experience has not been *proven* to be so for God. His *answer in our chapter* is simple: "The theory of Creation *ex nihilo* includes nothing that is impossible" (*v'sh'hahamtzat hamitzui min haheider klapei h'aino msug hanimna*).

The Alleged Impossibility of Creation Implies the Eternality of Matter. By making Creation one of the impossibilities the philosophers made their god imperfect. This was the real problem for Maimonides. Their gods were subject to matter. They were not transcendent.

> "They therefore assume that a certain substance has coexisted with God from eternity in such a manner that *neither God existed without that substance, nor the latter without God*."

They did not, though, make matter a *partner* of God nor a separate god. Here is the nuance. God *causes* matter's existence. The relation of matter to the philosopher's God was like that of a potter with clay. God creates in matter what He wants, just as the potter creates whatever he wants.

> "They do not hold that the existence of matter equals in rank that of God: for God is the cause of that existence, and matter is in the same relation to God as the clay is to the potter, or the iron to the smith: God can do with it what He pleases; at one time He forms of it heaven and earth, at another time He forms some other thing."

"At another time He forms some other thing." The Platonic Demiurge was *free to choose* the materials to make the world just as the artist chooses his materials. But the Demiurge could only choose from existing materials. The Midrash portrayed this weakness in a debate between R. Gamliel and a Platonic philosopher:

> "A certain philosopher once asked Rabban Gamliel: '*Your God is a great artist*; however, He found many excellent raw materials that helped Him: Emptiness, disorder [*tohu v'vohu*], darkness, wind, water, and depths.' He [R. Gamliel] said of him [the philosopher]: 'May the spirit of that man depart from him; for *regarding all of them* [those elements]*, creation is written*.'" (Sefaria: *Bereshit Raba* 1:9).

God did not *find* them; He created them. But for the Platonists, the elements were only those ready to hand.

***What Did "Nothing" Mean to the Platonists*?** One way that some Platonists avoided charges of impiety was to argue that they really did believe in Creation. In the phrase "Creation *ex nihilo*," Creation from nothing, they could say that "nothing" meant "something" because matter *contained* a kind of nothingness. Here is why:

Aristotle and Plato had rejected the idea that a pure nothingness, vacuum, or void could exist. Their world was *filled* with adjoining substances. Aristotle, however, saw that there is a kind of void *in being*. He called it *steresis*, "privation." His triad of *matter*, *form*, and *privation* produces dynamism in the universe. In every thing there is an emptiness looking outward, an unfulfilled potential seeking to become a new substance. Maimonides explained that this made matter like the promiscuous *married harlot*, ever on the lookout for a new mate.

This *privation* was a kind of "nothingness." Some neo-Platonists thought *something could come from nothing* if "nothing" is matter or its concomitant privation. To avoid such wordplay, R. Saadia Gaon devised the term "not-from-thing." The truth is that whatever the Platonists chose to call their doctrine it was only Creation *ex aliquo* (from something) not Creation *ex nihilo*.

(**No Vacuum**: Guide 1:73 Prop. II. **Steresis**: Jud.Ar.—אלעלדם אלמחץ, See my chapter-essay to Guide 1:6. R. Efros, in *Philosophical Terms*, 36-37, defined *Heider* as:

> "*Privation*, ...Relative non-being, *i.e*., that which is not yet but will be. It is also called *heider ha-miyukhad*, particularized privation, i.e., a privation of a particular form. This privation does not leave matter until the form is realized and then replaced by another particular privation… Hence relative non-being represents some positive existence… it is a capacity and tendency of matter to receive the particular form."

Married Harlot: *isha zona*, Proverbs 7:6-27. See Guide 1:6, 1:17, and 3:8. **Ex aliquo**: Thomas Aquinas conceptualized this idea as *Fit ex nihilo, id est non fit ex aliquo*, *i.e*., the universe is made from nothing, meaning that it is not made out of something. *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 45, a. 1, *ad* 3. See, esp., Dunphy, "Maimonides' Not-So-Secret Position on Creation," in *Moses Maimonides and His Time*, ed. Ormsby, Washington DC, 1989, 151.)

***Did the Platonists Accept Creation in Genesis 1*?** Since some Platonists said that the heavens were "created," many people imagined that their view was the same as the Torah view:

> "His opinion, however, does not agree with our belief: only superficial and careless persons (*sh'aino mavkhin beyn hahashkafot v'aino ma'amik b'iyun*) wrongly assume that Plato has the same belief as we have. For whilst we hold that the heavens have been created from absolutely nothing, Plato believes that they have been formed out of something."

People who do not make distinctions and do not understand the Platonic view cannot see the conflicts between Platonism and Judaism. They are not the same. While both the Torah and Plato say that at first *there were no* heavens and *then there were*, the Platonic view features no *Creation* as such. The truth is that real Creation *ex nihilo*, as in Genesis 1, was for them an incomprehensible impossibility. The two opinions do not align.

The Platonists Do Not Agree Among Themselves. Maimonides dismissed the Platonists. Since there were as many schools of Platonism as there were Platonists, why waste time sorting them out?

> "The people belonging to this sect are in their turn divided into several sects. But it is useless to mention their various sects and opinions in this Treatise. *However, the universal principle held by this sect is identical with what I have told y*ou. (*aval ha-yisod ha-klali shel kvutza zo hu ma sh'hazcharati lakh*)." (Pines trans., 283)

The Platonists' "universal principle" was that *everything in the universe* comes from and will return to *eternal* universal matter. As a corollary, they agreed that *time* came with *motion* when the *demiurge* generated the world from matter.

They disagreed, however, on many other things.

Since Plato never defined matter, the Platonists differed on what it was, *e.g*., whether matter was an idea, a potentiality, a dimensionality, a magnitude, or even *space*. R. Even-Shmuel reported that the Platonists also could not agree on how *something* comes from *something* (*yesh m'yesh*). It is all well to assert that everything is "produced from some existing *matter* and again reduced to some *matter* that remains in existence," but if that matter is entirely *conceptual* and only conceivable when we abstract the *concept* of form from a formed substance, how does something *conceptual* become *physical*? Different schools thought that *between* such conceptual matter and physical substances *some intermediary matter*, *i.e*., "chaos," "*tohu v'bohu*," or something like *corporeal form* could resolve the mind-body problem.

Maimonides could ignore all of this because Platonic matter, however dubbed, is eternal.

> "They…believe in the Eternity of the Universe, and so long as this theory is adopted, it makes no difference to us whether it is believed that the heavens are generated and corrupted, and that only their substance is eternal, or the heavens are held to be indestructible, in accordance with Aristotle."

The Platonists are thus no better and considerably more confusing than the hard-core Aristotelian eternalists.

(**Platonic Time.** According to Aristotle's testimony, Plato *alone* among previous philosophers believed that *time* was generated. *Physics* 8:1:251b13-20, citing *Timaeus* 38b. **Platonic Matter**. On their different views of matter, and their suggested intermediaries, see R. Israel Efros, *The Problem of Space in Jewish Medieval Philosophy*, Columbia U., 1917. Maimonides rejected *corporeal form*. See my chapter-essay to Guide 2:12.]

THE THIRD OPINION: THE ARISTOTELIANS

Maimonides' Aristotle: Maimonides' Aristotle is refreshingly uncluttered. But that is a problem.

Perhaps Maimonides streamlined his Aristotle as a relief from the Platonic complexities. The truth, however, is that Aristotle was not transparent. In *any* translation, even Joe Sachs' revolutionary translations, reading Aristotle takes work. Prof. Sachs wrote:

> "They are demanding texts to follow…. Aristotle made his students work hard, but he gave them the materials they could work with, words and phrases taken from the simplest contents of everyday speech… Aristotle's genius consisted in putting together the most ordinary words in unaccustomed combinations. Since the combinations are jarring, our thinking always has to be at work, right now, afresh as we are reading." And, "The original is written… for generally educated people of any sort who are willing to think hard." Joe Sachs, *Aristotle's Physics: A Guided Study*, 2-3, Rutgers, 1998; *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, Green Lion Press, 1999, Introduction, xxxv.

Sachs' school argued that the translations have historically dogmatized Aristotle. When you actually read him, however, he is anything but dogmatic. I would extend the point to say that the Jewish scholastics also dogmatized him. Given all that, how should we regard Maimonides' digest of Aristotle?

Maimonides meant to specify Aristotle's governing philosophical commitments for the coming debate on Creation. Maimonides' genius could assimilate libraries through his amazing powers of *compression.* He did this for the Talmud in Mishneh Torah, for Muslim theology in Guide 1:71-76, and for Aristotle himself in the 26 Aristotelian Propositions. The Arabic philosophical and translation tradition prepared his solid grasp of Aristotle's writing. But compression necessarily changes the character of those texts.

Aristotle proceeds by making distinctions, raising qualifications, puzzles, and competing possibilities. He retraces his ground and weighs tentative conclusions. Maimonides, however, needed a clear Aristotelian *position*. He systematized what Aristotle often treats as exploratory.

Maimonides' Aristotle stands for these propositions here: 1) Matter and motion are eternal, 2) Generation and corruption occur on our eternal earth, but *not* in heaven, and 3) the *divine will* never changes.

This summation served Maimonides well: once Aristotelianism had been distinguished from Platonism and stated in its strongest, cleanest form, Maimonides can grant virtually Aristotles' entire account of nature while isolating the part he contested—the necessity and eternity of the world itself.

(**Sachs' school of Aristotle reading:** German philologists Heidegger and Nietzsche, and, later, Jacob Klein. See Sachs, *Aristotle's On the Soul*, 38 through 41, Green Lion Press, 2004. **The Arabic translation tradition**: see, generally, Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, Routledge, 1998, which destroyed preconceptions about what could have been known to men like Maimonides. **26 Aristotelian Propositions**: see Guide v. 2: *Introduction*.)

<u>What Made the Aristotelians' Eternalism Different.</u>

> "Third Theory.—*viz*., that of Aristotle, his followers, and commentators. Aristotle maintains, like the adherents of the Second Theory, that a corporeal *object* cannot be produced without a corporeal *substance*. He goes, however, farther, and contends that the heavens are indestructible."

Maimonides began by sharply dividing the views of the Aristotelians from the Platonists. One principle they all relied upon, however, was that the Torah Opinion of Creation *ex nihilo* was impossible.

The Platonists had argued, however, that the heavens were physical things generated and corrupted just like the things on earth. They believed that they came from the *same kind of matter*. The Stoic notion of the *eternal recurrence of the same* came from this idea: matter is eternal, but since there are a fixed number of forms the process of generation endlessly repeats, creating new worlds and destroying them (R. Abbahu's idea in Midrash *Bereshit Rabba*, above). Aristotle's reading of Plato's *Timaeus* was based on a passage that suggested that the heavens are created and destroyed. Maimonides followed Aristotle in that reading. However, elsewhere in the *Timaeus* Plato argued the contrary, that because the heavens are *good*, God promised never to destroy them.

[*Timaeus* 37b implied that the heavens will be destroyed, but in *Timaeus* 41a7–b6, his Demiurge vowed that though they are corruptible, He would not let such a perfect thing expire. The solution is that the eternal heavens are, at least, *subject to corruption*, like everything else, since for Plato there is only *one* universal matter.]

The Aristotelians rejected this, arguing that there are *two kinds of matter*. Their heavens were made of an eternal *rotating* matter called "fifth element," "quintessence," or "*aether*," while our world is made of matter in *vertical* motion. This matter manifested itself as the familiar ancient elements of earth, air, fire, and water.

In the Aristotelian conception the ungenerated and uncreated heavens *always were* and *always will* be as they are now, *indestructible*, eternal, uncreated and ungenerated, ever in rotational motion. Since time is the measure of their eternal motion, time also is everlasting. Time was not created nor will it ever end.

> "For he [Aristotle] holds that (1) the Universe in its totality has never been different, nor will it ever change: (2) the heavens, which form the *permanent element* (*ha-davar ha-kayam*) in the Universe, and are not subject to generation and corruption, have always been so; (3) time and

> motion are eternal, permanent, and are not generated and not corrupted; 4) the sublunary world, which includes the generable and corruptible elements, has always been the same, because the *materia prima* [*ha-khomer ha-rishoni*] is itself eternal, and merely combines successively with different *forms*; when one form is removed, another is assumed. This whole arrangement, both above and below, is never disturbed or interrupted, and nothing is produced contrary to the laws or the ordinary course of Nature."

This Aristotelian view features no subtleties. Nothing changes. It upholds the principle of *conservation of matter*, that matter can neither be created nor destroyed, only rearranged. New rabbits appear, but within limits, no truly different rabbits. The dance of matter, form and privation produces different arrays, but with no loss or new creation. The philosophers used the image of a solvent perfume base to imagine matter and form. Matter, like that base, has no character but can carry any form. Thus, the substances of our world constantly change, but their underlying matter never changes. Matter remains matter. Like the heavens and the forms themselves, it is an eternal reality of our world.

Aristotle did accept that, within limits, plants and animals could change *teleologically*, *i.e.,* purposively. Nonetheless, Maimonides was correct in identifying Aristotle's commitment to *species stability*: He proposed no mechanism by which a species could evolve. There is no new thing under the sun. Nothing out of the ordinary [*yotze min ha-klal*] ever occurs.

The Divine Impossibilities. We have explained how the philosophers used the doctrine of impossibility against Creation *ex nihilo*. Aristotle expanded the list impossibilities to limit what God could do.

> "He [Aristotle] wrote—*though not in the same terms*—that he considers it impossible for God to *change His will* or *conceive a new desire*; God produced this Universe in its totality by His will, but not from nothing. Aristotle finds it as impossible to assume that God changes His will or conceives a new desire, as to believe that *He is non-existing*, or that *His essence is changeable*. Hence it follows that this Universe has always been the same in the past, and will be the same eternally."

In saying that Aristotle wrote "though not in the same terms" Maimonides meant that commentators derived further impossibilities about God from his doctrine. God neither changes what He wants nor creates a new will. This becomes another reason why Creation would be impossible. This requires explanation.

The idea is that a Creation *ex nihilo* would have to take place at some time in the past, *e.g*., at 1:00 AM on a Sunday 6000 years ago. But then God would also have had to *decide* to create the world at some moment *before* that time, which is doubly absurd. Even if we overlook Maimonides' *critique of time*, and ignore the "Why Now?" question (from the last chapter), we still have to explain *how* God came to make a *new decision*.

Unlike the inconstancy of man, God never changes. He is perfect, as are His mind and His will. They need no improvement. The Aristotelians therefore added divine change to their list of impossibilities. This was also part of their critique of the Platonists. Plato's demiurge would have to make a *new decision* to generate the world from pre-existing matter, which would also be an impossible absurdity.

To avoid such limits, and to deflect charges of heresy, medieval Aristotelians argued that God *constantly generates the universe from Himself*, but not from nothing, uninterruptedly. God emanates matter's existence like the sun emits its rays. Still, this did not mean that God conceived a new *desire*, or ever changed His *will*.

Maimonides' response would be that since God's actions are not governed by the rules of our material universe, we have no idea how He arrives at His judgments.

CONCLUSION

> "This is a full account of the opinions of *those who consider* that the existence of God, the First Cause of the Universe, has been established by proof."

With this, Maimonides brought us to the concluding paragraph of our chapter. First, though, he assured us that the Aristotelians and the Platonists were "those who consider" God's existence proven.

Dismissal of the Atheists. The reason that Maimonides wrote that those philosophers believed in God was to exclude those who did not, who he calls Epicureans. For them, the world arose *out of itself*, through random collisions and dispersions, in a mindless chaos of disordered corpuscles, atoms, or elements.

> "It would be quite *useless to mention* (*ain toelet l'hazkhir*) the opinions of those who do not recognize the existence of God, but believe that the existing state of things is the result of the accidental combination and separation of the elements, and that the Universe has no Ruler or Governor. Such is the theory of Epicurus and his school, and similar philosophers, as stated by Alexander; it would be superfluous to repeat their views, since the existence of God has been demonstrated whilst their theory is built upon a basis proved to be untenable." (Epicurus 341–270 BCE; Alexander Aphrodisiensis, Aristotelian commentator, fl. 200 CE.)

According to Socrates, the turning point in philosophy's history was the realization that there had to be an intelligence (*nous*) that brings order to the universe (*Phaedo* 97b-99b). This intelligence appears in every part of the universe. Xenophon recalled how Socrates used this realization to refute an atheist:

> "Are you, then, of the opinion that intelligence (*nous*) alone exists nowhere, and that *you* by some good *chance* seized hold of it, while—as you think—those surpassingly large and infinitely numerous things (all the earth and water) are in such orderly condition through some *senselessness*?" (Xenophon, *Memorabilia*,1:4:8, Amy Bonnette trans., Cornell, 1994).

Maimonides refused to debate atheists because he had *proven* the existence of God. It was no mere *belief*, but a logical deduction (Guide 2:1). Given that, why debate people who base themselves on disproven arguments? The atheists' theory was "Built upon a basis proved to be untenable."

Final Dismissal of the Platonists.

> "*It is likewise useless* (*ain lanu toelet*) to prove the correctness of the followers of the Second Theory in asserting that the heavens are transient, because *they at the same time believe in the Eternity of the Universe*, and so long as this theory is adopted, *it makes no difference to us* (*ain hevdal atzleinu*) whether it is believed that the heavens are transient, and that only their substance is eternal, or the heavens are held to be indestructible, in accordance with the view of Aristotle."

The Platonists were also eternalists, though not so plainly as the Aristotelians. R. Even-Shmuel explained:

> "Those who hold this opinion do indeed *speak* of creation, but of the 'creation' of something from something [*yesh m'yesh* not *yesh m'ain*]. Their *universe* is not eternal, but its *matter* is eternal." (3:188)

Just as it was pointless to debate atheists, so with the Platonists, however, in their case, it was not because their views had been disproven, but because as Eternalists they were no different from the Aristotelians. Both believed that something *besides* God was eternal. The God of the philosophers is, thus, always subject to *some other thing*. The Torah's doctrine, however, is that *there is nothing else beside* God [*ain od m'lvado*, Deut. 4:35, Midrash *Devarim Rabbah* (Lieberman recension), *Va-etkhannan*, pp. 65–66].

The philosophers' gods, by contrast, are *in* the universe and confined to it; *immanent* not transcendent. Matter is *always* beside their gods or proceeding from them. Maimonides' insistence on divine Creation maintained the Torah's unique view of divine transcendence.

.***The Philosophers' "Impossibility*."** Maimonides did not explain *here* why Torah adherents reject the philosophers' allegation that creation is impossible:

> "The theory of Creatio *ex nihilo* includes nothing that is impossible…. having described the different theories, I will now proceed to show how Aristotle proved his theory, and what induced him to adopt it" [He did so over the next 12 chapters, Guide 2:14-25].

The philosophers had alleged that Creation *ex nihilo* was impossible because it *violated the causal rules* of things in *an already existing universe*. But those rules do not work *if there is no universe*. Maimonides did not have to *prove* divine Creation. He only had to show that it was *not impossible*. (Reading Guide 2:17 with Guide 3:15).

Dismissal of the Kalām. However, regarding Creation *ex nihilo*, "Some thinkers even regard it as an established truth," meaning the Kalām. For them, *everything* is a miraculous Creation from nothing.

Even the momentary re-creation of this page before me would be a miraculous Creation *ex nihilo*. My thinking that the page stayed the same the whole time is mere illusion. There was no guarantee it would not become something completely different in a moment. That was because the Kalām believed that anything *imaginable* is *possible*: the *only* impossible thing is what they could not *imagine*. Maimonides proved that this was folly in his "*Note on Imagination*." He did this by showing that there were *intellectually conceivable* things that the unaided imagination could not grasp.

("**Note on Imagination**." Guide 1:73, Kalām Proposition X, where Maimonides dismissed their licensing of the imagination: see in my chapter-essay, "Two Proofs Against the Imagination" where I explained his *asymptote* proof. Maimonides destroyed the Kalām's ineffective proofs for Creation in Guide 1:74. **Momentary re-creation of this page**: al-Ghazali, in Averroes' *Tahafut al Tahafut*, 323, Cambridge, 1987, Van den Bergh trans., gave the example of a book suddenly turned into a boy when no one was looking!)

The Return to the 26th Proposition. Having dismissed the Platonists, the Atheists and the Kalām, there were only two opinions left: the Torah Opinion and the Aristotelian opinion. Maimonides reported the Eternalist doctrine and his attitude toward it in his 26th Aristotelian Proposition (Guide II: Introduction):

> "To the above [25] Propositions one must be added which enunciates that the universe is Eternal. It is held by Aristotle to be true, and even more acceptable than any other theory. *For the present we admit it, as a hypothesis* (*v'hinei naskim lo ba al derekh ha-hanakha*) *only for the purpose of demonstrating our theory.* It is the following Proposition: *Time and motion are eternal, always in actual existence*…. Aristotle frequently attempts to establish this Proposition; but I

> believe that he did not consider his proofs to be conclusive. It appeared to him to be the most probable and acceptable proposition. His followers, however, and the commentators of his books, contend that it contains not only probable but demonstrative proof, and that it has, in fact, been fully established."

Maimonides will no longer "admit" eternalism for the sake of argument: *God's exclusive eternity* (*kadmut Hashem*) was incompatible with the *eternity Aristotle attributed to the world* (*kadmut haolam*).

RABBI YOSEF KASPI AND THE STRANGE AFTERLIFE OF GUIDE 2:13

> *Macbeth's porter*: "(Knock.) Knock, knock! Who's there, in th' other devil's name? Faith, here's an equivocator, that could swear in both the scales against either scale; who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven. O, come in, equivocator." (*Macbeth* 2:3 7-12).

R. Josef Kaspi's *Maskiyot Kesef* ("Veils of Silver") commentary on the Guide was a historically important early Aristotelian Eternalist gloss on our chapter. It provided an unusually explicit example of a type of misreading still pursued by many academics. For Rabbi Kaspi (c. 1279—c. 1340), Maimonides' public prose was a ruse designed to delude the faithful adherents of Creation, who he mocked as "Perhaps the Kalām and their associates," and "The masses who make such beliefs into cornerstones."

He thought he had the decoder to reveal the truth that Maimonides secretly adhered to Aristotelian Eternalism. He claimed that Maimonides wrote the Torah Opinion so ambiguously that even Aristotle could accept it. The key was R. Kaspi's misuse of the term *shem m'shutaf*, Maimonides' technical term for a word in scripture that was not merely equivocal or ambiguous, but a *homonym* whose meaning for *men* bore no relation to its meaning for *God*. R. Kaspi, to the contrary, made it stand for mere *ambiguity*. He wrote: "Whenever Maimonides said that something is 'the opinion of the Torah of Moses,' it is stated in carefully fashioned language, using *equivocal* terms (*m'shutefet*) suitable also to Aristotle's opinion." His wrongly tagging Maimonides as an equivocator was, thus, a better index to his own equivocations. (My trans. of R. Kaspi, *ad loc*. **Homonym**: used frequently in the "*Lexicon*," Guide 1:1-45. See my chapter-essay to Guide 1:12.)

R. Kaspi turns Maimonides' terminology into its opposite, erasing the difference between Creation *ex nihilo* and *ex aliquo*, reckoning that no educated person could possibly believe that something comes from nothing. Thus, "Creation," *khidush*, could mean "generation," but also *any* change, however small. "From absolute and complete absence," *heider ha-gamur ha-mukhlat*, despite its triple emphasis, meant absence merely of *form*, surely not of *matter*. When Maimonides said that God created "*every existent* apart from God," *kol nimtza*, he could not have meant "every existent," but only *some* of them. R. Kaspi thus systematically neutralized every term that Maimonides used for Creation.

R. Kaspi charged that Creation is not and was never meant to be a fundamental *Torah Principle*. "Maimonides did not establish the belief that the world is created, nor other things the masses, both great and small, make into cornerstones" (*v'lo sam imam l'ha-amin sh'ha-olam m'khudash, v'zulat zei, m'ma sh'hamon g'dolei imanu v'katanim osim pinot*). *Here he gave the game away*. The argument is no longer that Creation has a double meaning, but that it ought not to count as a genuine Principle in the first place. Unfortunately for him, Maimonides actually did make it a "cornerstone" in his amended *13 Principles of Judaism* (see below), where he called Creation a "Great foundation of the Torah of Moses."

His final claim typified the "contradictions" modern interpreters discover everywhere. The idea is that *elsewhere* in the Guide Maimonides supposedly took a contradictory agnostic position on Creation, usually

referring to Guide 2:25. But Maimonides' statement targeted there was written in the *subjunctive* mood: *if* eternity could be demonstably proven (like he had proven the existence of God), he could interpret Genesis to adjust to that reality. But only *if* it were a proven reality, which it is not.

In those days, the reason mostly alleged for Maimonides' so-called esotericism was the elitist view that the Jewish masses could not grasp a logical proposition. In our own time, the explanation is the Straussian view that Maimonides' concern to avoid *persecution* forced him to hide his true heretical beliefs. The critics usually portrayed those secret beliefs as Platonic or Aristotelian, but more recently Maimonides seems to have become an adherent of ancient Pyrrhonian skepticism. Some make him the first Reform Jew.

R. Kaspi pioneered these three interpretive moves that critics use to negate or reverse Maimonides' expressed views. *First*, treat his statements as either equivocal or a ruse to blind the public. *Second*, contend that his secret philosophical doctrine opposed religion. *Third*, explain the tension by recourse to concealed doctrine. That is how R. Kaspi's undermining of the actual message in Guide 2:13 became the template for future revelations of Maimonides' "secret doctrine."

MAIMONIDES' AMENDMENT TO THE *FOURTH PRINCIPLE OF BELIEF*: THE *REAL* AFTERLIFE OF GUIDE 2:13

> "**The Fourth Principle** is God's *precedence* (*priority* or *eternality-kadmut*); to wit, that this One Who has just been described is He Who *precedes* everything absolutely (*hakadmon b'heikhlat*). No other being has *precedence* with respect to Him (*v'kol nimtza zulato bilti kadmon b'arkho elav*). There are many verses attesting to this in Scripture. The verse attesting to it best is: 'The God of *eternity* is a dwelling place' (Deut. 33: 27 - *m'ona elokei kedem*)."

> "[**Maimonides' Amendment to Fourth Principle**:] Know that one of the great Principles of the Torah of Moses, our rabbi, is that *the world is created* (*m'khudash*); that God brought it into being, creating it *after absolute absence* (*akher haheider hamukhlat*). That you see me *hovering* (*sovev saviv*) around the *matter of Eternality* (*kadmut ha-olam*) in dealing with the opinions of the philosophers is [only] so that *the proof of His existence will be absolute* (*k'dei sh'y'hei hamofet mukhlat*), may He be exalted, as I have explained and clarified *in the Guide* (*b'moreh*)."

(**Top paragraph** is the *Original Fourth Principle* from Maimonides' ***Thirteen Principles of Judaism***, in *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Introduction to *Perek Helek*, written in in Judeo-Arabic. **The second paragraph** is the *Marginal Amendment* to the Fourth Principle, in three ancient Judeo-Arabic manuscripts, esp. *MS Poc*. 295, see *plate* at the end of this chapter-essay from *Digital Bodleian*. **Translation of *original* and *amendment***: English translation adapted by us from David M. Blumenthal, online; and from M. Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Thought*, Oxford 2004, 14-15, with additions from B. Sochaczewski, "Of Dogma & Dissimulation: Marc Shapiro's Analysis of Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised," in *Hakira, Flatbush Journal of Jewish Law and Thought*, 31:125, 2022. Hebrew is from R. Kafiḥ. **Absolute Proof**: Where it says in the Amendment, "So that proof of His existence will be absolute," Maimonides meant that this proof would be acceptable even to opponents of Creationism.)

Maimonides' Fourth Principle of his 13 *Principles of Judaism* was the Principle of *Eternal Divine Precedence* (*kadmut*). It appeared in the *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Introduction to *Perek Helek*, written around 1168. The original did not explicitly mention *Creation*, but *implied* it. "No other being has *precedence* with respect to Him" meant that God's existence is *exclusive*. There can be no other being unless He creates it. That other beings do exist means that God had created them. As an older man who suffered misinterpretation and misunderstanding, he realized he had to make those implications explicit. He did so in this marginal *Amendment* to the manuscript of the Fourth Principle.

Several authors have described Maimonides' process of publication, common in the medieval Arabic speaking world: he would have kept his original manuscript at home as his "fair copy," and invite professional scribes to transcribe them there under supervision. Maimonides would annotate or alter his own fair copy throughout his life, and the scribes included those alterations.

The *Amendment* expressly mentioned the *Guide of the Perplexed*, the composition of which, around 1190, provides its earliest possible date.

(***Marginalia***: The entry was composed "Towards the end of his life," acc. to Benjamin Williams, *i.e*., prob. during Maimonides' last decade. The ms. was most likely in Maimonides' arthritic hand. See Williams' "Bringing Maimonides to Oxford: Edward Pococke, the Mishnah, and the *Porta Mosis*," 157-176, in *The Mishnaic Moment: Jewish Law among the Jews and Christians in Early Modern Europe*, Oxford, 2022. See *plate* at the end of this chapter-essay. **Eternality/precedence**: *kadmut*, Jud. Ar. קדם –See Efros, *Philosophical Terms*, 105; Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary Of The Hebrew Language*, 187, Haifa, 562-563; Jastrow *Dict*. 1316-1317. R. Albo: "the term 'priority' [*kadmut* = 'priority/precedence/eternality] which is predicated of God, must be understood in a negative manner, in the sense that nothing was prior to Him, not even non-existence," *Ikkarim* 2:18, JPS 1929. **Misinterpretation and misunderstanding:** See Maimonides' opening remarks in his *Treatise on Resurrection*. **Publication**: Colette Sirat in "Maimonides by his Own Hand," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et litteraire du Moyen Âge* 81 (2014), explained the process of ancient copying well. Nonetheless, her interpretation of the *marginalia* is opposite to mine.)

<u>The Role of Guide 2:13 in Establishing the Amendment</u>. In the Guide, Maimonides related Creation *ex nihilo* to divine *eternality* and *unity*. Our chapter prepared the world for his Amendment to the Fourth Principle. Here is his emphatic statement of the Principle of Creation:

> "First Theory.—Those who follow the Law of Moses, our Teacher, hold that the whole Universe, i.e., everything except God, has been brought by Him into existence out of nonexistence. In the beginning *God alone existed* (*levado haya mitzui*)*, and nothing else* (*v'ain m'uma zulato*);… *He then brought forth from nothing all existing things*…. This [Creation *ex nihilo*] is the First Theory, and it is *undoubtedly a fundamental Principle of the Law* of our teacher Moses; it is next in importance to the Principle of God's Unity. *Do not follow any other theory*…. All who follow the Law of Moses, our Teacher, and Abraham, our Father, and all who adopt similar theories, assume that *nothing is eternal* except God (*ain shum davar kadmon klall im h'*), and that the theory of Creatio *ex nihilo* includes nothing impossible." (Guide 2:13)

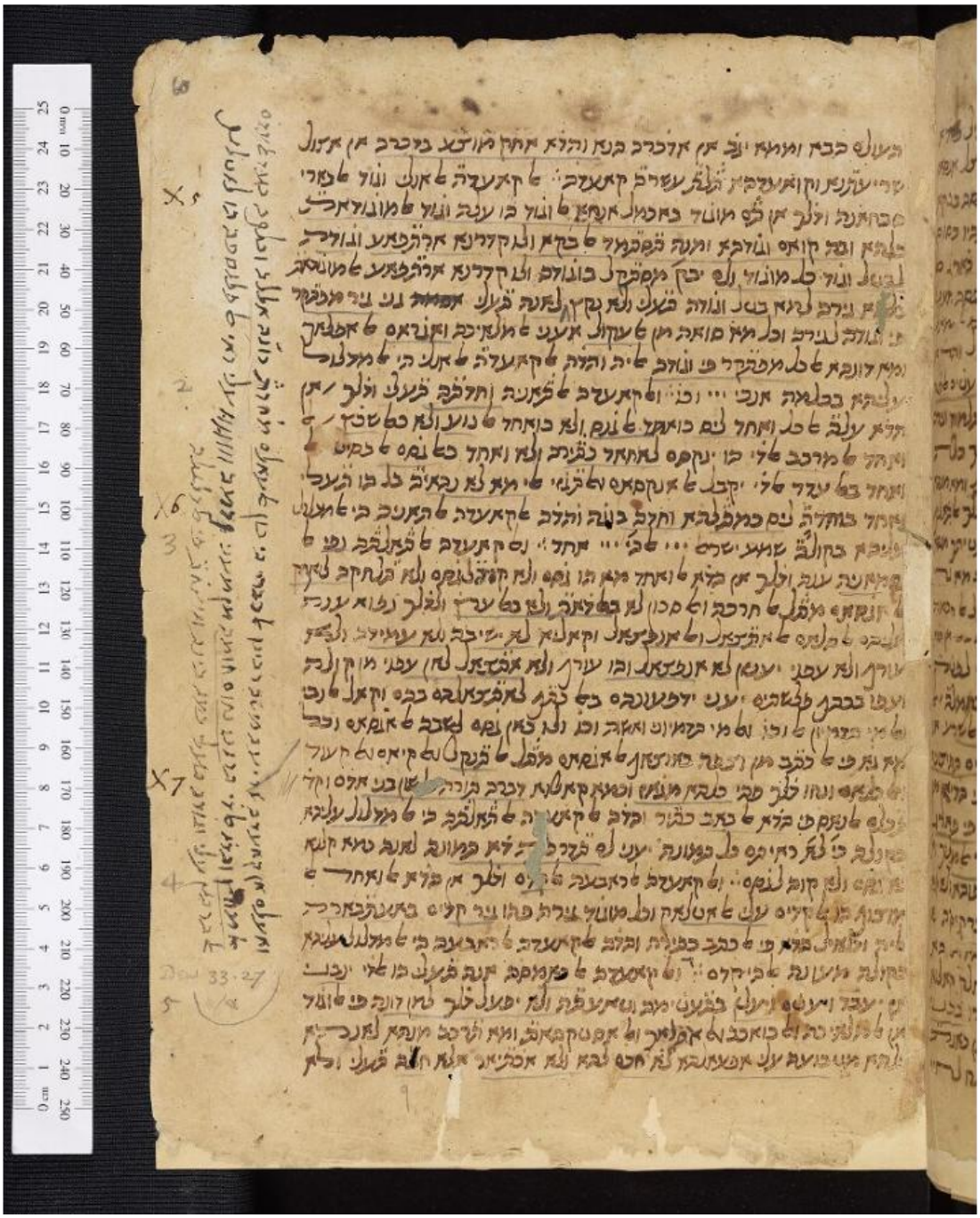
Maimonides finally located the doctrine of Creation in the Principle of Divine Precedence, the *Fourth* of the 13 *Principles of Judaism*. Since God precedes *everything*, He is the Being Who exists exclusively and alone. It follows that everything else was *created*. There was nothing from which to take things.

Sensing that his critics would misinterpret *the amount of spac*e the Guide devoted to Aristotelian Eternalism, he wrote this striking second line in the margin, where he explained that his temporary acceptance of Eternalism was tactical: "That you see me hovering around the matter of Eternity (*kadmut ha-olam*) in dealing with the opinions of the philosophers is only so that the proof of His existence will be absolute, *as I have explained and clarified in the Guide*." Our chapter, Guide 2:13 is where he explained and clarified this.

God's exclusive eternality and priority entail the world's Creation from absolute nonexistence. The key that links His *kadmut* (eternal precedence) with *m'khudash* (creation) is the critical second line of the original Principle: "Every existent other than Him is not prior in relation to Him" (my trans. of R. Kafiḥ: *kol nimtza* ***zulato*** *hu bilty kadmon b'yakhas elav*, Jud. Ar.: וכל מוגוד גירה פהו גיר קדים באעתבארה אליה). God's exclusive eternality necessitates the world's Creation if it is to be at all.

By affirming that God created the world from nothing, Maimonides made Creation *ex nihilo* part of the explicit statement of the Fourth Principle. As Creator God transcends the universe He alone created. Maimonides' *Amendment* secured that recognition forever in the Principles of Judaism.

(See *Plate* on next page)



Maimonides' autograph addition to the fourth of the Thirteen Principles. Pencil underlining and notations are by Edward Pococke, 17th C. See p. 10 and 14 of Williams, *op. cit.* on p. 23: "Though today's readers at the Bodleian must swear never to 'mark, deface, or injure' this or any volume in its custody, Pococke's annotated copies of Maimonides' *Commentary* illuminate a significant moment in its transmission history." Image courtesy of the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/b7e0b998-0a85-4a30-851f-58d67be5247d/

Copyright © 2026, Scott Michael Alexander, no copying or use permitted without express written permission of the author. You may contact me with comments, questions or criticism at scottmalexander@rcn.com
See maimonides-guide.com for previous chapters of ***The Guide: An Explanatory Commentary on Each Chapter of Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed***