

## GUIDE 2:2 CREATION AND VOLITION

### *Introduction to the Book of Creation*

At this point, having shown that he could prove three of his requirements for religious belief to the satisfaction of both Jerusalem and Athens, *i.e.*, divine existence, unity, and incorporeality, Maimonides begins to make his case for divine creation, the fourth required belief.

The argument for creation will take him through the next 23 chapters, to Guide 2:25, but will still require his analysis of prophecy in the last part of Volume II. Prophecy is the concluding premise in the Guide's proof for creation.

Since the turn to creation is a major change in direction for the Guide, Maimonides wrote a new Introductory Preface just for this Book of Creation. This entire short chapter is that Introduction, even though it also contains its own "*Preface.*"

Whenever Maimonides writes an introduction or a preface, we must devote our attention to it. These prefaces are the most important and memorable parts of his writing. Indeed, while few read his first major work, the *Commentary on the Mishnah*, its section prefaces, known as *Helek*, *The Eight Chapters*, and *The Introduction to the Mishnah* continue to be staples of Jewish education. This is also true for the Guide since the *Introduction* to Volume I of the Guide is its most important chapter.

Our chapter, Guide 2:2, is another important preface. It is where Maimonides begins to present his allusive and elusive discussion of creation.

He begins briefly setting the terms of the debate between creationism and several versions of eternalism. He then urges, without supplying any rationale, that the theory of the existence of the *separate intelligences of the spheres* is critical to understanding his arguments for creation. Next, he appends a *Preface*, apparently an *apologia*, in which he insists that he only mentions science or philosophy to resolve difficulties in Torah studies relating to the topics of creation, providence, prophecy, and divinity. He repeatedly urges that he did not pursue science for its own sake.

What he really meant was that it would take all our efforts in Torah and in these secular disciplines to grasp the relation of the separate intelligences to creation, and to reveal prophecy as the channel mediating our relationship to divine intelligence and creativity. The key to all of this will be the vital role of volition in creation.

### ***First Problem: Generation and Corruption***

Before we get to the debate over creation, Maimonides asks whether the universe is subject to what he called "generation and corruption," *havah nifsad*. But instead of directly asking whether the *universe* was generated, his specific question is whether the *elemental substrate* of its cosmic spheres was generated. He chose this one element from all the other constituents of the universe to maintain parity between two schools of philosophers, *i.e.*, those who believed that the spheres are both generated and subject to corruption, on the one hand, and those that thought that they must be eternal, on the other. Maimonides sides with neither of them.

Both schools agreed that everything beneath the spheres was generated. Even the elements of archaic physics – fire, air, water, and earth – were generated from more basic constituents, matter and form.

The nerve of their dispute was whether *cosmic matter* was different from those four elements. Aristotle conceived that this special matter was a unique “fifth element,” *quintessence*, which he called *aether*/αἰθήρ. Since the stars always seemed to pass through the same houses of the zodiac, the Aristotelians concluded that this *aether*, unlike the other four elements, was unchanging.

The Aristotelian spheres surrounded the earth like a glass onion, keeping it in constant motion. They were ungenerated, incorruptible, rotating, transparent, and, therefore, utterly unlike any substance on earth.

Their Generationist opponents disagreed. They argued that everything, including the spheres, was generated and would be destroyed. Maimonides made them the first voice heard in this chapter.

“The fifth matter, which is the sphere, *must be generated* and subject to corruption, and also its motion must be generated and corruptible, *or it is not generated* nor corruptible, as the *opponent* stated.” (My translation. Others, unless otherwise noted, are from Friedlander’s translation. My emphases in all quotations in this chapter.)

When Maimonides identified the protagonist for eternal ungenerated *aether* as his “opponent,” *ha-yariv*, he clearly had Aristotle in mind. Aristotle is the second voice in the initial debate.

### ***Who Is the Believer in a “Generated” World?***

Maimonides, however, does not identify the first contender, the advocate for the generation of the spheres. This has led to confusion among the commentators. R. Even-Shmuel, for instance, following R. Narboni (14<sup>th</sup> C.), thought that the Generationists were the Kalām, who he says followed Plato. But this reference to the Kalām is unlikely. The Kalām, meaning the Muslim theologians of the Asharite Kalām, did not believe in the generation and corruption of matter (Guide 1:73). For them all things were composed of Kalāmīc atoms, which were miraculously created and re-created in each and every moment by divine direct action. Those atoms were unlike Aristotelian matter since they were entirely *actual* and not *potencies*. God created the Kalām atoms from nothing. They were not generated from anything else.

(Wolfson did identify some *mutakallimun* as Generationists. See: “The Meaning of *Ex Nihilo* in the Church Fathers, Arabic and Hebrew Philosophy, and St. Thomas,” *Studies in the History of Religion and Philosophy*, 213-214, but that was not how Maimonides understood the Kalām, as reflected in his description of their ideology in Guide 1:73).

The first debater could not have been Maimonides either. Maimonides always voices the teaching of the Torah, that God creates the universe from nothing without any process of generation. Maimonides also denied that the universe would be corrupted and destroyed (Guide 2:27-29).

Plato’s physical substances were generated when underlying *eternal matter* joined with *form*. They were combined by the Demiurge, δημιουργός, the “craftsman” deity who formed substances from eternal matter, as a potter forms clay. The universe has *come into being* (*Timaeus* 28b-c). In other words, everything in it, including the cosmic spheres, was generated from eternal matter, which could not be created or destroyed.

This Platonic matter, “the nurse of becoming” (*ibid.* 52d-e), was neither generated nor corrupted. It would endure, though all the generated substances, including the elements of earth and heaven, would eventually be corrupted (“[They] fly continually in various directions and are dissipated,” 52e).

In Guide 2:13 Maimonides explained the theory of Plato and the Generationists, and why he would not be too specific about them. In general, eternalism is the opinion...:

“...all the philosophers of whom we have heard reports and whose discourses we have seen...say that it is absurd that God would bring a thing into existence out of nothing...They believe that there exists a certain matter that is eternal as the deity is eternal; and that He does not exist without it, nor does it exist without Him;...it has the same relation toward Him as, for instance, clay has toward a potter or iron toward a smith; and He creates in it whatever He wishes. Thus, He sometimes forms out of it a heaven and an earth...The people holding this opinion [generationism] believe that *the* [astronomical] *heaven too is subject to generation and passing-away*, but that it is not generated out of nothing and does not pass away into nothing. For it is generated and passes away just as the individuals that are animals are generated from existent matter and pass away into existent matter. The generation and passing-away of the heaven is thus similar to that of all the other existents that are below it [i.e., on earth].

“The people belonging to this sect [the Generationists] 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 you. This is also the belief of Plato. For you will find that Aristotle in the “*Akroasis*” [*Physics* 251b20] relates of him that he, I mean *Plato*, *believed that the heaven is subject to generation and passing-away*. And you likewise will find his doctrine in his book *Timaeus* [28a-d]. But he does not believe what we believe, as is thought by him who does not examine opinions and is not precise in speculation; [who] imagines that our opinion and his [Plato’s] opinion are identical. But this is not so. As for us, we believe that the heaven was generated *out of nothing after a state of absolute nonexistence*, whereas he believes that it has come into existence and has been generated from some other thing.” (Guide 2:13, Pines’ trans.)

Since “it is useless to mention their various sects and opinions,” Maimonides was particularly careful not to name the first debater. This was a wise choice. It frees him to focus narrowly on the question of whether *aether* was generated, which some neo-Platonized Aristotelians of his own time contended (Wolfson, *ibid.*).

The general idea of the Neoplatonics was that *The One*, out of an abundance of goodness, continually pours forth everything in our universe, either by choice or necessity, through a process called “emanation” (from the Latin *emanare* – “to flow from” or “to pour forth or out of”; Hebrew: *shefa*), which included the successive emanation of the cosmic spheres.

Maimonides properly chose not to specify any version of this doctrine, or to name any spokesman. Instead, he deftly summarized its principal element: Was elemental *aether* generated from pre-existing matter?

### ***Why the Believer in a Generated World Believes in God***

“If the sphere is subject to generation and corruption, it is the Deity, may His name be sublime, who *brought it into existence after its having been nonexistent (mamtzio akher ha-heder)*. This is a *first intelligible*, for everything that exists after having been nonexistent must have of necessity someone who has *brought* it into existence — it being absurd that it should bring itself into existence.” (Pines trans.)

Maimonides returns now to the message of the last two chapters, that any philosopher should believe in God. Though his emphasis had previously been on the Aristotelian Eternalist philosophers, Maimonides now insists that the Neoplatonist Generationists should also accept the existence of God. Since nothing can generate itself there must be a divine generator.

This strikes Maimonides as being so obvious that he calls it a “first intelligible,” a *muskal rishon*, i.e., an axiom requiring no further proof. This “first intelligible” is based on two assumptions which qualify as first intelligibles themselves. The *first* is that anything generated had a cause for its existence, since every effect must have a cause. The *second* is that since nothing can be its own cause nothing can create itself. The only exception to this latter axiom would be the uncaused One who never was nonexistent, who always was and always will be.

### *Who Is the God of the Generationists?*

Bear in mind that this God of the Generationists is not a *creator*. It is a demiurge who *brings forth* the sphere from matter. One who “brings forth” is a *producer*, not a creator. This distinction is sometimes lost in English. Friedlander missed it when he called the God of the Generationists the “Creator.” Pines’ translation better identifies the role of the Generationists’ God: “... it is the Deity, may His name be sublime, who *brought it into existence*.” (Both Kafih and Ibn Tibbon translate as *mamtzi*, “producer,” in contrast to *mkhudash*, “creator.” Schwarz’ translation, agreeing with Pines, is more explicit: המביא לידי מציאות).

But Maimonides also says here that God who “brought it [the sphere] into existence,” did so *akher ha-heder*. This is confusing because, according to Wolfson, Maimonides usually uses *akher ha-heder* to mean *ex nihilo* (*Studies*, 363). The phrase would then literally mean that the Generationists believed the spheres to have been “brought forth from nothing,” *mamtzio akher ha-heder*. But they did not believe in creation *ex nihilo*. Why would Maimonides attach *ex nihilo* language to the Generationists?

The explanation for this apparently mismatched terminology is as follows. While there is no “creation *ex nihilo*” in eternal generation, each substance emanated is a new substance with respect to itself, though the stream that generated it is eternal. The stream was not created though everything born of it is new.

Maimonides was therefore correct to say that “If the sphere is subject to generation and corruption, it is the Deity, may His name be sublime, who *brought it into existence after its having been nonexistent*.” The stream of generation is uninterrupted, but each individual cosmic sphere produced by it was brought to existence after having been nonexistent.

Maimonides discussed such changes in his Proposition XVIII: “Everything that *passes* from potentiality to actuality has a separate external change-agent.” Any such passage, even the emanation of a sphere, must be caused by an external change-agent. But the causal chain of those corporeal agents cannot ascend forever. There must be an incorporeal Actualizer who is the ultimate cause of all causation. This Actualizer would be the God of both the Generationists and the Aristotelian Eternalists: The God of the philosophers.

None of this means that the generated spheres were created *ex nihilo*. Neither school, the Generationists or the Eternalists, believed in creation. They insisted that *nothing comes from nothing, ex nihilo nihil fit*. The Neoplatonists, with few exceptions, believed in *de novo* “creation,” i.e., that new substances were *brought forth*, not *created ex nihilo*. Only the religious, including the Kalām, but also Maimonides, argued for creation. (On the distinction between *ex nihilo* and *de novo*, see Seeskin, *Maimonides on the Origin of the World*, Cambridge, 2006. On eternal *de novo* generation from out of God himself, see Wolfson, *ibid.*).

Note that Maimonides did not call the first debater his “opponent,” as he did with Aristotle, since he did not consider the Generationists’ eternalism to be the threat to religion that Aristotelian eternalism was. Moreover, with respect to Plato, Prof. Pines observed that:

“There is no doubt that in Maimonides’ opinion, Plato, considered as a physicist and a metaphysician, rated much lower than Aristotle....In his letter to Ibn Tibbon [his translator], Maimonides makes it very clear that, in view of the fact that Plato’s works are full of parables, the serious student need not trouble to read them,” (*Translator’s Introduction to the Guide*, p. *lxxv*).

His view may have included the Neoplatonists as well. We do not know Maimonides’ view of the relationship between the medieval Neoplatonists and the original Platonic academy. Part of the problem was the poor state of translations of the dialogues. Since Plato’s *Timaeus*, with its large helping of difficult myth, was what he could have known of Platonic physics (Arabic translation, 9<sup>th</sup> C.), it is not surprising that he frowned on that tradition. (Herbert Davidson thinks that his actual knowledge of Plato was only through Aristotle or Alfarabi. *Moses Maimonides, The Man and his Works*, Oxford, 2005, 341).

### ***Why the Aristotelian Eternalist Believes in God***

“If, however, the sphere has not ceased and will not cease thus to be moved in a perpetual and eternal movement, it follows necessarily from the premises that have been set forth before that the mover that causes it to move in this eternal movement is not a body or a force in a body; it is in fact the Deity, may His name be sublime.” (Pines’ translation)

The Generationist had to answer the question: What was the cause of the existence of the generated sphere?

Aristotle did not have to answer this question. His eternal spheres did not require an agent to bring them forth or to create them. They always were and always would be in existence. But he was not exempt from the question: What kept them moving? For nothing moves itself. Everything that moves must have a mover (Propositions XVII and XXV).

In the First Philosophical Proof for the existence of God, Maimonides showed that of the four possible causes for the rotation of the sphere the one that he could not exclude was an incorporeal external force (Guide 2:1). He then showed there could only be one such force, the philosophers’ unmoved mover.

The result was that even Eternalists who rejected the existence of a creator could not reject a divine mover. Since that mover not only exists, but is one and incorporeal, Maimonides could commit Aristotelian Eternalists to his first three doctrines of religion, despite their rejection of the fourth, the belief in creation.

### ***Absolute Existence***

“We have thus shown that whether we believe in *creatio ex nihilo*, or [not], we can prove by demonstrative arguments the existence of God, i.e., an *absolute Being*, whose existence cannot be attributed to any cause, or admit in itself any potentiality....This has been explained by us in the *Third Philosophical Argument* [in support of the existence of God]...”

After showing that there are physical arguments that will commit both the Generationist and the Eternalist to belief in God, either as the *mamtzi*, the One who *brings forth* the universe, or as the *menia*, the One who *moves* the spheres that produce universal motion, Maimonides now moves to commit all parties to God’s *absolute existence*, upon which all *contingent* beings depend. This is the first step in his proof of *creation*.

This absolute existence of God was the conclusion of his Third Philosophical Argument from the last chapter. It was the only argument that was entirely based upon metaphysical propositions, with no admixture of physical science or any analysis of motion. For that reason, it was immune to changes in the scientific paradigm, making it his most enduring proof of divine existence. (However, in a close reading of the other proofs, as in my last chapter essay, we can read them without depending on ancient paradigms).

The point of the Third Philosophic Proof is that it makes no difference whether a person admits to the creation of the universe or rejects it, – we cannot explain the existence of the universe unless we admit the absolute existence of God. His absolute existence is the *sufficient reason* for the existence of all other things just because alone among them His essence and existence are the same. By contrast, the existence of all other contingent beings must be caused by another.

In the quoted passage, Maimonides showed that he preferred the Third Philosophic Proof over the other three proofs for divine existence.

Let us take a moment to recall those proofs. The First Philosophic Proof showed that the rotation of the universe could only have an external and incorporeal cause. The Second Philosophic Proof proved the existence of God from the analysis of motion: i.e., since the last thing moved in the chain of motion can remain separate and unmoved, there must also be a first *unmoved mover*. The Fourth Philosophic Proof proved the existence of God as *actualizer* from the *potentiality* implicit in all motion.

The only proof divorced from concepts of physics was the Third Philosophic Proof. It was also the only one that revealed God's transcendence. That was why Maimonides made that proof the keynote of his *Mishneh Torah*, as well as the first of his 13 Articles of Jewish Belief (*Commentary on the Mishnah, Helek*).

By committing all sides to the absolute existence of God, Maimonides has begun to commit them to his account of creation. His long argument for creation depends upon God's absolute existence as *volitional* cause to account for *inexplicable* aspects of reality.

But that proof requires, in addition, the existence of other volitional agents.

### *The Separate Intellects*

“... We shall return to our task and discuss the theory of *creatio ex nihilo* [*khidush ha-olam*]. For the best arguments in favor of this theory cannot be fully comprehended [lit: cannot be validated nor explained, *lo titkayem v'lo titbaer*] unless the theory of the existence of [the separate] intelligences [*ha-sikhlim ha-nivdalim*] be well understood, and also the method which I adopt in proving their existence.”

Maimonides' doctrine of creation relies, he now tells us, on the theory of the existence of the *separate intelligences* of the spheres, the *sikhlim ha-nivdalim*. They are called “separate” because, unlike our minds, which go where we go, they are entirely separate from matter and its motion. Maimonides and Aristotle believed that the perfect rotation of the cosmic spheres could only be caused by intelligent unmoved movers external to those spheres. Those volitional agents choose to act out of love for God.

Maimonides tells us that the philosophers' doctrine of the separate intellects accords well with religion's concept of the *angels*, the *malakhim*. He insists that the existence of those angelic agencies is a foundation of the Torah, just as the intellects are fundamental to Aristotelian physics.

Though the Hellenic and Hebrew views of those agencies arose independently, he notes that their characteristics are largely similar (*v'avaer teium davar ze l'ysodot torateinu, k'lomar mtziot ha-malakhim*).

Note Maimonides' comment that his proof for creation will not work and that he will not even be able to explain it [*lo titkayem v'lo titbaer*] unless we understand the doctrine of the separate intellects. He repeatedly insists that his case for creation depends on these two elements: the critical role of God's absolute existence and the crucial though subordinate role of the intelligences. But neither Maimonides nor his commentators explain here why they are important.

### *Maimonides' Argument for Creation*

“...We shall return to our task and discuss the theory of *creatio ex nihilo*. For the best arguments... cannot be fully [validated and explained] unless the theory of the existence of *Intelligences be well understood*...”

Why does Maimonides require that the theory of the separate intellects “be well understood” to grasp his proof of creation? Why can't we understand it or even articulate it without recourse to the existence of such separate volitional agencies?

Unless we can grasp the centrality of the intelligences and of God's absolute existence to his doctrine of creation, we will not understand why he keeps insisting on it. We need to review his argument for creation.

Maimonides' general proof of creation appears in parts over the next 25 chapters, and requires them for its development. Although he does not develop its points in one place, we can reconstruct its structure:

1) Anything that is here forever *must* be here forever. It follows that *eternity equals necessity, and necessity equals eternity*. They are reciprocally implicative. This is the basic assumption of the proof. (Guide 2:20).

2) But because the universe displays rationally *inexplicable particularities*, those particularities could not be the result of pure mathematical rationality, *but only of will*. There does not seem to be, for example, any necessity displayed by the random patterns of the cosmos. If the universe were set up on a geometrical grid there would not be inexplicable groupings of visible stars in the shape of mythological heroes, nor would there be eccentric or retrograde motion in the planetary bodies. This is the axis of the proof. He wrote:

“What determined that the one small part [of the heavenly sphere] should have ten stars, and the other portion should be without any star? and the whole body of the sphere being uniform throughout, why should a particular star occupy the one place and not another?” (Guide 2:19).

The answer is that those inexplicable particularities require a volitional particularizer. This is the *argument from particularization*. It is the only Kalām argument Maimonides accepts, even though he uses it differently than they do (Guide 1:74, 5th Argument).

3) The converse is that if the universe were set up on necessarily rational geometrical patterns it would *not* display evidence of volitional activity. That is because necessity leaves no room for choice. If everything must be the way it is, then even God lacks choice. *The necessary does not equal the volitional*. Necessity and volition are contradictories, and reciprocally dis-implicative.

4) It follows that *the volitional cannot be eternal* (since 1, above, showed that eternity = necessity, but volition contradicts necessity, *then* eternity  $\neq$  volition). If the universe results from volitional activity, its existence is not necessary and is therefore not eternal. We had already said, in 2, above, that the universal inexplicable particularities require a volitional explanation: they must have been created. (*Creation implies volition and both contradict eternity*).

5) “It is impossible to reconcile the two theories, that of necessary existence by causality, and that of Creation by the desire and will of a Creator” (Guide 2:20). In other words, *there is no third alternative* to the “disjunctive” division between creation and eternity. This disjunction cannot be avoided by taking refuge in the Neoplatonic doctrine of necessary “creation” through generation. (On the disjunctive syllogism, see my chapter-essay on Guide 2:1, *First Philosophic Proof*).

*Therefore*, there being no alternative, the inexplicable particularities show us that the universe must be the result of creation *ex nihilo* by a volitional Creator.

6) The final proposition is that evidence prophetically revealed for creation is reliable. Maimonides needs this evidence since his entire argument to this point has been rhetorical, not demonstrative. The reason that it is not demonstratively conclusive is that we have no Archimedean vantage or God’s eye view which could confirm creation and dispel any lingering doubt. Only the prophetic texts can seal his argument. It helps that, in his view, philosophers accept evidence of prophecy.

7) For this structure to work there must be an absolute volitional being at its very summit, God, who is the sufficient reason for the contingent particularities of all things.

8) We also know (and Aristotle would agree) that God does not usually act through direct contact. (Guide 1:18, 2:4, 3:8; Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1118b1-4. Guide 1:18 emphasizes the baseness of direct contact: “...the sense of touch, which is a disgrace to us according to Aristotle”).

*Therefore*, built into the system there must be other *volitional actors*, hence, the separate intellects, to whom the regular physical processes of the world are delegated. These intelligent monads are distributed through the system to effect their Creator’s will (Guide 2:6, 2:10).

We may like to think that we have banished purposive factors from our understanding of cosmology and cosmogenesis. But though we have rejected the ancient cosmology and much of the ancient physics, volitional elements continue to erupt in our thinking about the physical conduct of the universe. The hypothesis of *design* has never lost its power to explain why the ongoing quantum wave, the interactions posited by string theory, or the “Big Bang” did not result in chaos. We ask too much from chance if we demand that it explain everything. Moreover, the end results of evolutionary development cannot possibly be explained by mere random interaction. (R. Bakhya Ibn Pakuda, *Hovot* 2:5; David Gelernter, “Giving Up Darwin,” *The Claremont Institute Review of Books*, Spring, 2019, and volumes discussed there).

The more random the universe appears and the less subject to any grid of Cartesian rationality, the more likely that it is populated with willful actors. Chance cannot explain the organic totality we see. It is a *muskal rishon* that nothing uncreated can create itself, including this densely interconnected whole.



(Regarding Descartes, Owen Goldin, in “*Metaphysical Explanation and ‘Particularization’ in Maimonides’ Guide of the Perplexed*,” wrote: “The Cartesian attempt to ground scientific explanations of the physical world entirely on self-evident mathematical truths, was, of course, soon abandoned as unworkable.” *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 1992, p. 26, note 27. Maimonides recognized this more than four centuries earlier. Descartes’ physics saw everything in the universe in terms of pure geometry over time. Bernard Williams called it “a totally abstract geometrical picture,” *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, “Descartes.”)

Though this chapter lacks positive content, it does point the way for the unfolding of Maimonides’ proof of creation. Just as he had committed the philosophers to belief in God, he now invokes their doctrines of the separate intelligences and of divine absolute existence to commit them to creation.

### *The “Preface”*

After having admonished us that we must fully grasp the doctrine of the separate intellects, he now begs our indulgence of a further *Preface*, which he claims will be a candle lighting our way through the darkness:

“Now before all that, it is obligatory to set forth a preface, which is like a lamp illuminating the hidden features of the whole of this Treatise (*sh’hi ner meir et mistarei maamar zeh b’klaluto*), both of those of its chapters that came before and of those that come after. This preface is as follows.”

There are two reasons that the Guide needs a lamp to guide the reader through those darkened rooms.

The first is that Maimonides’ argument for creation had to be concealed. That is because it is a topic governed by the law of the second *Mishnah* of *Hagigah*, which restricted speeches about topics of creation and providence. (We discussed the meaning of this *Mishnah* in our chapter-essay *Introduction I*.)

The second reason is that those darkened rooms are the landscape of perplexity: they are domains of consciousness that are problematics, always generating more problems.

Perhaps Maimonides’ lamp, his Preface, could help us to find the pearl concealed in the darkness. But our hope seems to fade like the lightning momentarily illuminating the night. For there is even less obviously positive content in this Preface than in the rest of the chapter.

Instead, Maimonides tells us what he does not do. He repeats, three times, that any discussion of philosophical doctrines in the Guide was only to illuminate difficulties in Torah studies, and not for their own sake. In each of these three repetitions he uses different phraseology and reveals additional dimensions.

### *Elihu’s Rule for the Interpretation of Repetitions*

In Guide 3:22-23, Maimonides tells us how to interpret repetitious material in sacred works.

Those chapters were about the friends of Job who repeated to him moral maxims. Maimonides focuses on the speech of the friend named Elihu. Maimonides calls Elihu the best of Job’s interlocutors. In Guide 3:23 we learned two things about Elihu: his explanation of the prophetic process and his system of concealment by repetition. Regarding that rhetorical method Maimonides states:

“A profound and wonderful discourse then follows. Reflecting on his words we may at first thought be surprised to find that he does not add anything to the words of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zofar; and that he only repeats their ideas in other terms and more explicitly. For he likewise censures and rebukes Job, attributes justice to God, relates His wonders in nature, and holds that God is not affected by the service of the worshipper, nor by the disobedience of the rebellious. All this has already been said by His colleagues. But after due consideration we see clearly the new idea introduced by Elihu [his theory of prophecy], which is the principal object of his speech, an idea which has not been uttered by those who spoke before him. In addition to this he mentions also other things set forth by the previous speakers, in the same manner as each of the rest, viz., Job and his three friends repeat what the others have said. *The purpose of this repetition is to conceal the opinion peculiar to each speaker, and to make all appear in the eyes of the ordinary reader to utter one and the same view, although in reality this is not the case.*” (Guide 3:23)

The doctrine that Elihu concealed by repetition was an understanding of prophecy akin to Maimonides’ understanding. He portrayed the mechanics of the emanation of the prophecy to the prophet in terms that Maimonides approved (Guide 2:42; See my discussion of Elihu’s views on prophecy, Guide 1:13).

Since this theory could be fruitfully applied to Torah studies, why would it need to be concealed? The answer is that prophecy is one of the doctrines of the divine science which the second *Mishnah* in *Hagigah* kept from public instruction. The teaching itself was not proscribed but only speeches given before classes with more than one or two students. (We surveyed the reasons why the divine science cannot be taught in public in our chapter-essays on Guide 1:34 and associated chapters).

### *The Topics of Divine Science*

Now, in this case, Maimonides has already told us that his doctrine of creation depends on the twinned subjects of the separate intelligences and of the absolute existence of God. Since both subjects are openly philosophic in nature, we should be able to discuss them openly. However, they both veer into divine science topics that Maimonides previously listed in Guide 1:34 and 1:35. He explained in those chapters that divine science concerns parables in the prophetic scriptures, “mysteries (*sodot*) and secrets of the law (*sitrei torah*),” including:

“The attributes of God, their inadmissibility, and the meaning of those attributes which are ascribed to Him; concerning the *creation*, His providence in providing for everything; concerning His will, His perception, His knowledge of everything; concerning *prophecy* and its various degrees: concerning the meaning of His names...” (Guide 1:35).

“What the *heavens* are, what is their number and their form; what beings are contained in them; what the *angels* are; how the *creation* of the whole world took place; what is its purpose, and what is the relation of its various parts to each other; what is the nature of the *soul*; how it enters the body; whether it has an *independent existence*, and if so, how it can exist independently of the body [i.e. after death]; by what means and to what purpose, and similar problems...*All these subjects are connected together...*” (Guide 1:34)

Here is a list of the topics of divine science that Maimonides mentions in those and other chapters, as well as where he discusses those topics:

- The nature of the cosmological heavens and the volitional agencies that move them, including the *angels*, and the relation of all those agencies to God (Guide 2:3-12);
- The nature of the soul (1:41);
- The homonymity or ambiguity of figurative expressions in the prophetic works (from the Guide’s Lexicon chapters);
- Which attributes are denied;
- Which attributes are affirmed (*u’ma inyan ha-taarim ha-myukhsim lo*: “what attributes *are* to be attributed to Him.” 1: 35, 51-60);
- *Creation* (2:13-30);
- Providence (3:16-24);
- Divine will/wisdom (1:68-69, 3:13, 3:17);
- Divine knowledge and its relation to human free will (1:19, 3:8, 3:19-23);
- The meaning of the multiple names of the one God (1:61-70).
- *Prophecy* and its gradations (2:32-48);

Since the mechanism of prophecy is part of the divine science Elihu was right to conceal it with his method of repetition.

### *Applying Elihu’s Rule to the Preface*

Does Maimonides use Elihu’s method of partial concealment in his *Preface*? Is that why he repeats three times that he only teaches philosophical topics like creation to resolve problems in the study of Torah? Since those topics swerve into divine science the law mandated that they should not be taught in public. That creates the following perplexity.

Since the four requirements of religion are obligatory on all religious believers Maimonides must explain them. But that means he must discuss what, by law, he may not discuss in public. Is it possible to mark off those subjects whose public review was proscribed by *Hagigah*? Even if it were possible to make such demarcations, how could it be legitimate, in view of that *halakha*, to publicly detail which parts of those subjects are dangerous?

Maimonides’ response was to adopt Elihu’s hermeneutic method, the use of repetition so that casual readers would not notice the actual discussion taking place. These repetitions display Maimonides’ skill in multilevel writing.

### *Maimonides’ First Repetition: Sublimity*

Thus, in his *first iteration* of his apology that he only mentions philosophical topics as an aid to Torah study, he says that he does not need to teach a course in philosophy since there already are perfectly adequate books on the subject, to which he has nothing to add. In other words, it is *already public*:

“Know that my purpose in this Treatise of mine was not to compose something on *natural science*, or to make an epitome of notions pertaining to the *divine science* according to some doctrines, or to demonstrate what has been demonstrated in them. Nor was it my purpose in this Treatise to give a summary and epitomized description of the *disposition of the spheres*, or to make known their number. For the books composed concerning these matters are adequate. If, however, they should turn out not to be adequate with regard to some subject, that which I shall say concerning that subject will not be superior to everything else that has been said about it.” (Pines’ trans.)

Here he mentions “natural science” (*madai ha-teva*), which, in this case, includes all of philosophy, both physics and metaphysics, and the “divine science” (*madai ha-elohut*), which includes all the subjects that we listed above for that science. At this point he only specifies items of astronomy.

The subject of the astronomical heavens does become an element of divine science (Guide 1:34). That is because the movers of those heavenly bodies are the separate intellects of the cosmic spheres, however many there are. Since those separate intellects seem to be analogous to the angels, we are in one of those problematic areas where the philosophy is taught openly in publicly available volumes but its divine science consequences or connections could not be taught publicly. (Note that the philosophic topic of the astronomical sphere does morph into the esoteric topic of the *Sefirot*, a topic closely related to angelology).

Maimonides will discuss the public aspects of astronomy in detail in the upcoming chapters, and particularly the problems which were rife in the cosmological paradigm of the medieval era. Maimonides did not respond to those problems by elaborating a new paradigm, as Copernicus did 300 years later. Instead, he used its contradictions to undermine the philosophers’ rejection of creation *ex nihilo*.

He continues, telling us briefly why he makes these references to Hellenic lore:

“But my aim in this book is just what I told you in its *Introduction*, to explain difficulties in Torah (*kashim b’tora*), and to reveal the true meaning of its secrets, which are too *sublime* for the many...”

(My translation. Instead of Kafih’s *l’maala m’havanot he-hamon*, “above the comprehension of the multitude” Schwarz has *sh’hen nishgavot he-hamon*, “too *sublime* {or transcendent} for the many.” Even-Shmuel also used the term *nishgava*, *ad loc.* The Judeo-Arabic is אעלי מן אפהאם אלג’מהור).

Some problems in Torah study require background philosophical knowledge. Those problems concern truths that were concealed in by prophets in their parables. Maimonides has already explained in his Lexicon that those problems are by their very nature too *sublime* to be studied without serious preparation (e.g, 1:31-32). They occur in noetic worlds that we have no ready access to, composed as we are of flesh and blood.

### ***The Second Repetition: Two Lists***

In the *second iteration*, Maimonides reveals two lists of subjects that will “unravel” knots in our understanding of that esoteric layer of Torah.

“Hence if you perceive that I speak about the establishment of 1) the existence of the separate intellects and about 2) their number, or about the number of the spheres and 3) the causes of their motions, or about 4) investigating the true reality of the notion of matter and form, or about 5) the notion of divine overflow [emanation] and about 6) other such notions, you ought not to think and it ought not to occur to you that I intended only to investigate the true reality of that particular philosophic notion. For these notions have been expounded in many books, and the correctness of most of them has been demonstrated. I only intend to mention matters, the understanding of which may elucidate some difficulty of the Law [the Torah]; in fact, many knots will be unraveled through the knowledge of a notion of which I give an epitome. Now you know already from the introduction of this my Treatise that it *hinges* on the explanation of *what can be understood* in A) the *Account of the Beginning* and B) the *Account of the Chariot* and C) the clearing-up of the difficulties attaching to *prophecy* and D) to the knowledge of the *deity*.” (Pines translation, my numerical and alphabetical listing)

The first group of subjects, six in number, are clearly philosophical in nature, and have been subject to public discussion. They do, nonetheless, impinge on divine science topics. That list includes:

1. The cosmic spheres and their motivating intelligences;
2. The number of those spheres and intelligences (which had never been settled in the past millennia of cosmological discussion);
3. How and why those intelligent beings *will* the movements of those spheres.
4. The subject of matter and form, which is about the nature of physical substance and how it comes to be. Since the *matter* of spheres was the matter of the fifth element, this would include any discussion of their aethereal matter and how the separate intellects gave it form.
5. The discussion of how the spheres and their intelligences were *emanated*. It also includes discussion of the specific emanations by which the spheres influence life on earth. Since prophecy comes as a divine emanation to the prophet, prophecy is an obvious case where philosophy verges on the territory of the *Maaseh Merkava*, an esoteric region of the divine science.
6. “Other such notions”: probably including the absolute existence of God.

That leads Maimonides to juxtapose his list of “what can be understood” in the four divine science topics (compare his divine science lists in Guide 1:34 and 35):

- A. The account of creation, *Maaseh Bereshit*, which is the esoteric interpretation of Genesis chapters 1 through 3;
- B. The account of providence, *Maaseh Merkava*, which is the esoteric interpretation of the first chapter of Ezekiel;
- C. The account of prophecy, which includes its relationship to the emanation that was topic 5 in the philosophic list;
- D. The account of the nature of God.

Clearly, not everything in the divine science “can be understood” since its nature is so sublime and so radically different from our own. We are instructed not to teach these things publicly, and we have been warned repeatedly not to provide a sustained and connected account to students. Those topics have an evanescent nature, like lightning in the night. They require a different kind of instruction than philosophical topics, which Aristotle taught in relatively connected reports, and Plato taught through dialogue. We could not use those methods to teach divine science.

Nonetheless, it is these four topics of divine science and not the five topics of philosophy that are axial to the Guide, since, as he says, “it hinges” on those four topics (*tziro saviv*— “rotates on its axis...”).

### ***The Third Repetition: The Keys to Prophecy***

He deepens this point in his *final iteration*:

“Accordingly in whatever chapter you find me discoursing with a view to explaining a matter already demonstrated in natural science, or a matter demonstrated in divine science, or *an opinion that has been shown to be the one fittest to be believed in* (Schwarz: *sh’raui b’yoter l’ha-amin bo*), or a matter attaching to what has been explained in *mathematics* — know that that particular matter necessarily must be a key to *the understanding of something to be found in the books of prophecy*, I mean to say of some of their parables and secrets. The reason why I mentioned, explained, and elucidated that matter would be found in the knowledge it procures us of the *Account of the Chariot* or of the *Account of the Beginning* or would be found in an explanation that it furnishes of some root

regarding the notion of prophecy or would be found in the explanation of some root regarding the belief in a true opinion belonging to the beliefs of Law.” (Pines’ trans)

When Maimonides mentioned “an opinion that has been shown to be the one fittest to be believed in,” he made an oblique, though honest, assessment of his own case for creation. That question cannot be conclusively settled since we have no God’s eye view of the first moment of creation. Of all the theories, however, it will be the one closest to the truth, and the one that is “fittest to believe.” That is why he made it his fourth requirement for all religious believers.

Now that he has told us the four axial topics of divine science and explained how proofs developed in the philosophic sciences are tools for teaching that esoteric material, he adds one more point. He mentions an apparently non-philosophic topic, mathematics, which was a necessary propaedeutic to philosophy, just like logic and the other topics that in medieval times were called the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*.

Mathematics does, however, have a divine aspect, as Pythagoreans and neo-Pythagoreans, like Plato and Plotinus, believed (compare the cabalist practice of *gematria*). The numeric and geometric objects of mathematics are eternal noetic entities while the numbered things are merely their temporal instantiations. Mathematics thus enters divine science.

But mathematics is not what is chiefly on Maimonides’ mind. What he is looking for are keys “to the understanding of something to be found in the books of prophecy... their parables and secrets.” Prophecy is the concluding term in the Guide’s proof for creation and the true purpose of the Guide. While philosophy provides tools for understanding prophetic speech, prophecy transcends philosophy.

R. Joseph Caspi (1280-1345) argued, regarding the *Preface*: “All of this suffices unto the faithful, that the whole intent of the Guide is to explain that the truths occurring in philosophy books are already in Scripture and in the teaching of the rabbis.” (My trans.)

R. Caspi was not wrong to tell us that there are Jewish sources for the productions of philosophy. Still, he does precisely what we should not do here. In this *Preface*, Maimonides is telling us how to read *his* book, while R. Caspi is telling us how to read the books of philosophy. This is a crucial difference in emphasis, and one that eluded more than a few commentators.

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[scottmalexander@rcn.com](mailto:scottmalexander@rcn.com)

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