# Introduction

To ask about the origin of the world is to ask why there is something rather than nothing. Although this question may seem like a natural one to us, it would be a mistake to assume that everyone regarded it so. Aristotle did not ask it, and there is serious doubt whether Plato did. Their concern was with the structure of the world, not its origin. Although Plotinus argued that all things have a common source in the first principle, he is thinking about the eternal procession of the world, a process that does not take place in time and is governed by metaphysical necessity. The first suggestion that the existence of the world is contingent and results from the free choice of God occurs in Genesis 1. I say *suggestion* because the text takes the form of a narrative rather than a philosophic argument and is subject to various interpretations.

In the Middle Ages, the question of origin became central because it was closely linked to questions about God. If the world is not eternal but was brought into existence, it is reasonable to conclude that there was an agent responsible for its coming to be and that this agent can act in a spontaneous fashion. Put otherwise, it is reasonable to conclude that the world is the product of God's will. If, on the other hand, the world has always existed, then even though God may be responsible for its existence, God cannot act in a spontaneous fashion, which is to say that God must always be doing the same thing. Although some thinkers ascribed will to the second conception of God, Maimonides protests that a God who cannot do anything different is ruled by necessity and cannot have a will as we normally understand the term. In addition to bringing the world into existence, the first conception of God also allows for miracles, revelation, and redemption; the second does not. So the question of origin was not just historical but, in an important way, theological as well. How one understands the origin of the world has a direct bearing on what one takes the world to be. What one takes the world to be has a direct bearing on what one takes God to be.

Although it is generally recognized that Maimonides' treatment of the question of origin is one of his major contributions to philosophy, there is little agreement about what that contribution was. According to one view, he defended what he took to be the position of the Torah and one of the pillars of the Law: the world was brought into existence out of nothing in the first instant of time. In short, time and motion were created together. I refer to this as creation *ex nihilo* and *de novo*. According to those who stress the esoteric nature of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides says he accepts the position of the Torah so as not to offend traditional readers. But the truth is he is committed to an eternal world that proceeds from God by necessity, the world as described by the science of his day. According to a third view, he is committed to a compromise

view similar to that described in Plato's *Timaeus*: the world was created in the first instant of time out of preexistent matter. If the structure of the world is imposed *de novo*, its material component is eternal.

All three views can be reconciled with Genesis 1, but it is clear that they have very different implications. Without as much as the possibility of miracles, revelation, or redemption, the biblical text would have to undergo a radical reinterpretation – so radical that one might well ask what of the biblical worldview remains. If the world were created from preexistent matter, one might well ask what the status of this matter is. Does it exist independently of God? Does it impose any limitations on God? Or is it created by God prior to the imposition of order and structure? Beyond these questions is the fact that Maimonides takes the Platonic theory of creation to imply that if the world came into existence, at some point it will perish. If so, what happens to the claim that God is a faithful and steadfast ruler? And what happens to claims of eternal life or promises of salvation?

As I read Maimonides, the Torah view is right not only because it allows us to retain substantial portions of the biblical worldview but because it rests on a superior philosophic foundation. The problem with the other two views is that they assume the creation of the world resembles the origin of a particular thing within it: that it requires the imposition of form on matter as prescribed by Aristotelian natural science. Why, asks Maimonides, should we assume this is so? If God does not resemble a human being, why should we assume divine production must resemble animal or vegetable production? There are good reasons to trust natural science when it comes to things we can observe. But why should we trust it when it comes to God? Why can divine production not proceed in a wholly different fashion, so that the origin of the world would not be anything like the fertilization of an egg or the growth of a plant from a seed?

The fact that Maimonides casts doubt on a naturalistic view of creation does not mean that he distrusted natural science altogether. On the contrary, he is convinced it is correct if we limit its application to the earthly realm. He begins to have doubts when we get to astronomy, pointing out that although Ptolemy's calculations are much more accurate than Aristotle's, Aristotle's theory of motion makes more sense. Finally, he has considerable doubt when we get to God and the origin of the world. To cast doubt on something is not to prove that the opposite view is correct. Despite his preference for the Torah view, Maimonides continues to say that the other views are possible and that the question of how the world came to be is not susceptible to demonstration. Rather than a subtle hint that he wants to distance himself from the Torah view, these remarks should be interpreted as no more than an honest assessment of the epistemological predicament in which Maimonides found himself: although the question of origin is important, the limits of human knowledge prevent us from resolving it with complete certainty.

What, then, is Maimonides' contribution? In addition to pointing out the limits of natural science and defending the biblical worldview, he called attention to a fundamental feature of human existence: the world does not present itself to us as the effect of an eternal process that can only culminate in one result, but as the object of a free and benevolent will. Thus, the world is contingent in the sense that God could have created a different world or no world at all. In a world of this sort, there are limits to what the human mind can understand and no point in trying to go beyond them. In a word, existence is a gift. It is given to us by God and could be taken away just as easily. The proper stance for a person who understands this is not intellectual complacency but humility and gratitude. That is what enables Maimonides to say that, along with monotheism, belief in creation is one of the pillars of the Law.

## Introduction

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# 1

# God and the Problem of Origin

Let me begin in a general way by talking about monotheism. As has been pointed out many times, monotheism is more than a numerical claim about God. In addition to asserting that there is only one God, it holds that this God is in some sense unique. Thus, Maimonides (*GP* 1.57, p. 133) maintains that to say that God is one is to say that God has no equal. We can understand "no equal" in either of two ways. The first is to follow the *via negativa* and argue that God bears no resemblance to anything else. God is neither a body, nor a force in a body, nor anything that resembles them. The second is to say that God exists necessarily and that everything else is dependent on God. In the beginning of the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides makes this point by saying that all

beings other than God need God so that none would exist if God did not.[1]

By the time he gets to the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides argues that the existence of a God with no equal and the creation of the world are the two pillars on which monotheism rests.[2] According to *GP* 3.29 (p. 516), both were espoused by Abraham:[3]

> However, when the pillar of the world grew up and it became clear to him that there is a separate deity that is neither a body nor a force in a body and that all the stars and the spheres were made by Him, and he understood that the fables upon which he was brought up were absurd, he began to refute their doctrine and to show up their opinions as false; he publicly manifested his disagreement with them and called in the name of the Lord, God of the world – both of the existence of the deity and the creation of the world in time by that deity being comprised in that call.

There is no need to spend a great deal of time on Maimonides' negative theology. If there is no likeness between God and anything else, the difference between God and other things is not one of degree but of kind. Thus (*GP* 1.35, p. 80): "Everything that can be ascribed to God . . . differs in every respect from our attributes, so that no definition can comprehend the one thing and the other." In another passage (*GP* 1.56, pp. 130–31), he goes so far as to say that words such as *knowledge*, *power,* and *will* are completely equivocal when used of us and God, and thus it is not true that God's knowledge and power are greater than ours, God's will more universal than ours, or God's existence more permanent than ours. It is not true because to say that it is would imply that there is a common measure of comparison and thus some degree of similarity.

[1] *MT* 1, Basic Principles of the Torah, 1.3.
[2] In addition to *GP* 2.25, see 2.13, p. 282; 2.27, p. 332; 3.50, p. 613.
[3] The same sentiment is expressed at *GP* 2.13, p. 282, and 3.50, p. 613.

A mustard grain, in Maimonides' opinion, has more in common with the outermost sphere of the world than we do with God.

So rigorous is Maimonides on this point that he denies there can be any sort of relation between God and other things. Following Aristotle, Maimonides understands relation in terms of reciprocity: if *x* is the father of *y*, by that very fact, *y* is the son of *x*.[4] A relation, then, is a bridge, an attribute that inheres in two substances at once and joins one to the other. If this is so, relation can only join things that resemble each other in some respect. Maimonides (*GP* 1.52, p. 118) makes this point by saying that only things in the same species can stand in relation to one another. To use his example, one finite intellect can be greater than another, and one color darker than another, but there is no possibility of a relation between the intellect and color because they have nothing in common, nor between a hundred cubits and the heat of a pepper, nor clemency and bitterness.

It follows that there is no possibility of a relation between a necessary being and a contingent one, for if there were, there would be an attribute that inheres in God and links the divine essence to something else. This would mean that God is affected by and in some sense dependent on a part of creation. Just as a father's nature is changed and partially determined by the relation to his son, God would be changed and partially determined by His relation to the world. Maimonides wants us to see that as soon as we begin to talk this way, we compromise God's simplicity and treat God like an ordinary object of experience.

The problem is that as we normally understand it, causality is a relation. Commenting on Aristotle, Maimonides writes (*GP* 2.22, p. 317): "There subsists necessarily a certain conformity between the cause and its effect."[5] Behind this remark is the view that when

[4] See Aristotle, *Categories* 7.3.
[5] Cf. Aquinas, *ST* 1.4.2.

two things interact with each other, an attribute that is present in one comes to be present in the other, as when fire passes heat to an iron bar. For Aristotle the effect is potentially what the cause is actually, from which it follows that when it becomes actual, the effect must resemble the cause.[6] This is exactly what Maimonides claims does not obtain between God and the world, because in his view, there is absolutely no resemblance between them. The world is spatial and temporal; God is outside space and time altogether. The world is complex; God is simple. How, then, can God be responsible for the motion of a body like a heavenly sphere?

Although he did not embrace negative theology, Aristotle faced the same problem. How can God be responsible for the motion of the first heaven if God is not subject to change? According to W. D. Ross, Aristotle's God is an efficient cause by virtue of being the final cause.[7] In other words, God causes the motion of the first heaven not by imparting a force that gets it moving but by being the object of desire.[8] To use Aristotle's own analogy, it is like a person we dislike who touches us without our touching him.[9]

It may be objected that Aristotle never attributes efficient causality to the Prime Mover and that efficient causality cannot be reduced to final causality without doing serious damage to our understanding of what it means to be a cause.[10] Suppose that an intelligent being represents divine perfection to itself. As Maimonides indicates (*GP* 2.4, p. 256), an idea of divine perfection, although necessary for efficient causality, is not sufficient because nothing will happen unless there is desire for it. But even desire is

[6] Aristotle, *De Anima* 417a18–20.
[7] See W. D. Ross, *Aristotle: Metaphysics*, pp. cxxxiii–cxxiv.
[8] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1072a26–27. Note, however, that there is at least one place where Aristotle describes the causality of the Prime Mover in physical terms: *Physics* 267b6–9. According to Ross (ibid.), this is "an incautious expression which should not be pressed."
[9] Aristotle, *On Generation and Corruption* 323a25–33.
[10] For the case against ascribing efficient causality to the Prime Mover, see Joseph Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics*, pp. 443, 468.

not sufficient. To borrow an example from Marvin Fox, a person suffering from paralysis may have an intense desire for an object, but without the ability to apply force, there still will not be motion.[11] The problem is that God cannot apply physical force to anything. As Maimonides (ibid.) recognizes, to say that God causes the movement of the first heaven is really to say that the first heaven desires to be like God. If so, it is the desire of the first heaven that is responsible for movement and is the true efficient cause.

In his commentary on the *Timaeus*, Proclus argues that if the Prime Mover is responsible for the motion of the heavenly bodies, then by parity of reason, he must also be responsible for their existence.[12] No doubt this is an attempt to say that the Prime Mover should have been more like Plato's Demiurge. To understand this criticism, consider the outline of Aristotle's account of the Prime Mover. It is impossible for there to be an infinite body. No finite body can contain more than finite power.[13] A finite power can only account for motion over a finite period of time. But the motion of the heavenly bodies is eternal. Therefore, there must be a separate cause of that motion that is not a finite body.

The question that Proclus raises is this: why should the same argument not work for existence? If no body contains more than a finite power, it can only account for existence over a finite period of time. The heavenly bodies exist eternally. Therefore, there must be a separate cause of their existence that is not a body. Although this is a reasonable inference, there is no evidence that Aristotle drew it. For Aristotle, efficient causality tells us how one existent

[11] Marvin Fox, *Interpreting Maimonides*, p. 232.

[12] See Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus* (Diehl, Vol. 1, pp. 266–67); cf. *Elements of Theology*, prop. 12. For further discussion of this point, see Davidson, *PEC*, pp. 281–82.

[13] Aristotle, *Physics* 266b25–26. For further discussion, see Davidson, "The Principle That a Finite Body Can Contain Only Finite Power," *Studies in Jewish Religious and Intellectual History*, ed. S. Stein and R. Loewe, pp. 75–92. This principle plays an important part in Maimonides' discussion of the end of the world and is discussed again in Chapter 6.