

ETERNAL TIME, ETERNAL SECRET: THE THESIS OF THE ETERNITY OF TIME IN MAIMONIDES' GUIDE OF THE PERPLEXED

TIEMPO ETERNO, ETERNO SECRETO: LA TESIS DE LA ETERNIDAD DEL TIEMPO
EN LA GUÍA DE PERPLEJOS DE MAIMÓNIDES

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RESUMEN ABSTRACT

En un excelente artículo que describe la estructura lógica de la *Guía de perplejos* de Maimónides, y sus argumentos confusos sobre la existencia de Dios, William Lane Craig (1988 122-147) concluye que la mayor parte del impacto de la Guía, se basa precisamente en su riguroso método de deducción. Tal vez, y bajo el punto de vista de Craig, esta es una de las cosas que hacen a Maimónides, un modelo para otros intentos de conciliación entre la teología y la filosofía. Sin embargo, a pesar de su cuidadoso análisis, hay una idea que Craig menciona y deja sin un desarrollo profundo, a saber, que una cierta noción de eternidad del tiempo subyace en el esquema argumentativo de Maimónides.

Tratando de ir más allá de los ejemplos ofrecidos por Craig en su artículo, mi método para encontrar una solución definitiva a la cuestión se divide en tres pasos. El primero es una reconstrucción de las declaraciones de Craig, y su interpretación como material de apoyo para su conclusión. A continuación, se presentan tres puntos de vista alternativos sobre las creencias de Maimónides de la creación del mundo, un tema estrechamente vinculado a su idea de tiempo. Finalmente, utilizaré el material de las dos secciones anteriores para desarrollar una respuesta a mi pregunta.

In an excellent article that traces the logical structure of Maimonides' *Guide of the perplexed* and his arguments on the existence of God, William Lane Craig (1988 122-147), concludes that most of the *Guide's* impact rests precisely on its rigorous method of deduction. Perhaps, in Craig's view, this is one of the things that makes Maimonides a model for further conciliating attempts between theology and philosophy. However, despite his careful analysis, there is one idea that Craig mentions and leaves undeveloped, namely, that a certain notion of eternity of time underlies Maimonides' argumentative scheme.

Trying to go beyond the examples Craig offered in his article, my method toward a final solution to the question is divided in three steps. The first one is a reconstruction of Craig's statements and its interpretation as supporting material for his conclusion. Then, I present three alternative views about Maimonides' beliefs on the creation of the world, an issue strongly attached to his idea of time. Finally, I use the material of the two former sections to support an answer to my question.

PALABRAS CLAVE KEY WORDS

Craig, tiempo eterno, Dios, *Guía de perplejos*, Maimónides, tiempo.

Craig, eternal time, God, *Guide of the perplexed*, Maimonides, time.

Introduction

In an excellent article that traces the logical structure of Maimonides' *Guide of the perplexed* arguments on the existence of God, William Lane Craig (1988 122-147), concludes that most of the *Guide's* impact rests precisely on its rigorous method of deduction. Perhaps, in Craig's view, this is one of the things that make Maimonides a model for further conciliating attempts between theology and philosophy. In the meantime, Craig studies in detail each one of the premises and the way they are organized to form a solid deductive system. However, despite his careful analysis, there is one idea Craig mentions and leaves it without deep development, namely, that a certain notion of eternity of time underlies Maimonides' argumentative scheme. Indeed, that notion is supposed to hold some of Maimonides' major premises on some of his proofs of God's existence.

Craig has dropped the bait and I have bit it. In fact, the aim of this paper is to answer the question: Is Craig's conclusion necessary, i.e., does it follow from the analysis of the *Guide* that Maimonides was holding the eternity of time as an undoubtedly truth? Trying to go beyond the examples Craig offered in his article, my method toward a final solution to the question is divided in three steps. The first one is a reconstruction of Craig's statements and its interpretation as supporting material for his conclusion. Then, I present three alternative views about Maimonides' beliefs on the creation of the world; an issue strongly attached to his idea of time. Finally, I use the material of the two former sections to establish an answer to my question.

The thesis of eternal time

As said before, Craig examines in detail each one of Maimonides' four proofs of the existence of God, showing in every case the deductive pattern. Among them, the first and third ones are especially interesting for us, given that they are from which the necessity of time to be eternal is obtained¹. Craig synthesizes the first proof in 12 consecutive steps as follows:

¹ It would be necessary to remind that in stating the proofs Maimonides uses the twenty-five propositions he considers the philosophers have proven as true. A final one the twenty-sixth that refers to the eternity of the world is not accepted as proven by Maimonides. That disagreement is the base for some of the interpretations we will see in the next section.

1. There must be a cause for the motion or change of transient things in the sublunary world.
2. There must be a cause of the motion of the cause.
3. This causal series of motion cannot be infinite and will cease at the first heavenly sphere, which is the source of the sublunary motion.
4. There must be a cause for the motion of this sphere.
5. This cause may reside without the sphere or within it.
6. If it resides without the sphere it may be corporeal or incorporeal.
7. If it resides within the sphere, it may be extended throughout the sphere and be divisible, or it may be an indivisible force.
8. Therefore, the cause for the motion of this sphere must be a corporeal object without the sphere, an incorporeal object separated from the sphere, a divisible force extended throughout the sphere, or an indivisible force within the sphere.
9. It cannot be a corporeal object without the sphere.
10. It cannot be a divisible force extended through the sphere.
11. It cannot be an indivisible force within the sphere.
12. Therefore, the cause for the motion of the sphere must be an incorporeal object separated from the sphere, or God². (124-125)

According to Craig, this proof requires the notion of the eternity of the universe, although he offers no argument supporting this statement. As far as I see, Craig's idea develops from the analysis of Maimonides' sixth step, the one that states the impossibility for a divisible force extended through the sphere to be the cause of its motion. Here there are the middle stages that hold the premise:

- a. The sphere must be finite. (For no actual infinite can exist).
- b. Therefore, the force it contains must be finite.
- c. And a finite force cannot cause eternal motion.
- d. But motion is eternal, according to the hypothesis.
- e. Therefore, a divisible force extended throughout the sphere cannot be the ultimate cause of the motion of the sphere. (130)

It is easy to see that stage d. appeals to the twenty-sixth proposition of the philosophers, the one Maimonides does not accept as proven. Then, he is using the hypothesis conveniently and leaving aside the problem of its truth, admitting it just for the sake of argument. Craig's point here

² I have omitted some intermediate deductions that support some of the steps. Not being the exhaustive analysis of Craig's outlines my principal interest I will only use those deductions if they are necessary to understand the thesis of eternity of time.

could be that the hypothesis about the eternity of motion implies the one about the infinity of time, once realized that motion is defined as change through time. If both Craig's argument and my interpretation are right, it would follow that Maimonides is simply holding Aristotle's notion of eternity of the world, something that, as we will see, would not be as simple as it seems at a first glance, and that is far from having been proven.

The conclusion obtained from the third proof is clearer. The proof's outline is this:

1. Many things exist.
2. There are three alternatives concerning the existence of these things: all things are eternal, no things are eternal, or some things are eternal.
3. It is impossible that all things are eternal.
4. It is impossible that no things are eternal.
5. Therefore, some things are eternal.
6. This thing is eternal on its own account or on account of an external cause.
7. If this thing is eternal on account of some external cause, then this thing is contingent in itself, though eternal on account of its cause.
8. The eternal cause is therefore the absolutely necessary being. (137-138)

The interesting premise here is number four, in which the impossibility of any eternal thing is denied. These are the intermediate stages that lead to that conclusion:

- a. If nothing were eternal, then it is possible that all things could cease to exist.
- b. What is said to be possible of a whole class of things must eventually actually happen, given sufficient time.
- c. Therefore, everything would cease to exist.
 - i. Given infinite past time, all possibilities would have to be actualized.
 - ii. The existence of nothing is a possibility.
 - iii. Therefore, the possibility of existence of nothing would have to have been actualized.
- d. But nothing would exist now.
- e. And this is absurd. (137-138)

In this case it is completely clear that the whole premise rest on the idea of eternal time. Without such a time the condition for all the possibilities having been actualized (c.i.) would not be fulfilled and, then, the necessity for everything to cease to exist would not follow, making the final conclusion lacking support. Again, this is nothing more than the argument Aristotle presents in his *Metaphysics*, which holds that every potentiality will realize its actuality.

From Craig's presentation it seems obvious that Maimonides' arguments rest on Aristotelian ground, and, it could be concluded, the compromise with the philosopher implies adherence to his method and results. Then, the answer to the question of the adherence to the thesis of time's eternity seems to be quite trivial. But as we are going to see soon, the equation of Maimonides with Aristotle will show to be highly problematic if taken too far, making the all structure of Maimonides' argument tremble. On the other hand, if there is a different basis for the conclusions of the *Guide*, how does the idea of eternal time fit into it? Looking for answers we are going to move to the arguments on the creation of the world, a good place for the discussion of Maimonides' commitment with the philosophers.

Maimonides' beliefs on creation

If there is something that the study of the *Guide* has shown it is that there is no consensus on what could be Maimonides' 'real beliefs' about the creation of the world. The problem of such beliefs arises with Maimonides' introduction to the *Guide*. There, he states that the knowledge of the secrets of the scriptures is only possible for special people, those that can actually grasp the meaning of the Law being able to read the truth between the lines. If such a demanding reading is necessary to understand the scriptures, it has been said, it is possible that the same kind of task must be performed in order to understand what Maimonides says in the *Guide*.

In the opinion of a large group of medieval scholars, that is the only way by which Maimonides' personal opinions on the topics the *Guide* deals with could be understood. Such group of exegetes paid close attention to the structure of the arguments and the contradictions among them to unveil Maimonides' beliefs. One of the more sound voices among the proponents of such a reading of the *Guide* is undoubtedly Leo Strauss. According to him, contradictions are the guide to trace Maimonides' real beliefs through the *Guide*.

Maimonides teaches the truth not plainly, but secretly; i.e., he reveals the truth to those taught men who are able to understand by themselves and at the same time he hides it from the vulgar. There probably is not better way of hiding the truth than contradict it. Consequently, Maimonides makes contradictory statements about all important subjects; he reveals the truth by stating it, and hides it by contradicting it. (Strauss 1988)

Among the important subjects involving contradictions there is one particularly significant, his discussion about the creation of the world. After having followed Aristotle's method for demonstrating God's being, his incorporeal nature and his unity, and concluding that the demonstrations are in accordance with the Law, Maimonides recognizes that there is something problematic in the basis of the system. The whole argument build by Aristotle is based on the premise of the eternity of the world and the infinity of time. Aristotle had pointed out the existence of two different kinds of bodies, on one side there are sublunary bodies characterized for being generable and corruptible, while on the other side there are the heavenly ones, not suffering at all from generation and corruption. However, despite of its generability and corruptibility, sublunary world share with the heavens one important feature, eternity. Nevertheless, while the eternity of the latter consists of its unchanging nature, the eternity of the former rest on the continuity of the change, of the process of generation and corruption.

Nobody in the world originates in time, nor does a body perish; it is only the forms and accidents that originate in time. Bodies are either the heavens, or they are eternal, or they are the four elements, which are the stuff of the sublunary part of the world; but, as for these four elements, their bodies and matters are also eternal, and it is only the forms that are continuously changed upon them as a result of mixtures and alterations... The series of the causes of all this things which originate in time terminate in the circular notion, which circular motion is eternal. (Al-Ghazali 154)

The problem that Maimonides is facing here is that this notion of an eternal world in time is an open contradiction with the idea of God's creation of the world, the standpoint of the Law. Then, Maimonides is trapped in the middle of a big dilemma. On one hand, Maimonides can reject Aristotle's arguments and say that what opposes the Law

is simply a mistake, but then he would have to show how is that the philosopher's conclusions about sublunary world physics went right, if their foundations were wrong. On the other hand, he would have to admit that the demonstrations are right, but then he would have to conciliate their results with the scriptures, that cannot be wrong. Here, says Strauss is where the contradiction appears. Maimonides religious commitments force him to reject Aristotle's notion of eternity of the world, and then to search for an alternative in accordance with the Law. The solution Maimonides found is to appeal to the platonic notion of eternity, one that, among other things, requires the existence of a God as a causal agent with free will, the perfect explanation for the miracles described by the scriptures and the notion of a world created in time. However, Maimonides keeps on holding Aristotle's physical explanations of the world. Consequently, the result is that the two systems of beliefs had been made compatible, or at least complementary to each other, only by their possible and particular accordance to the scriptures.

Strauss' uses this result to make a point about the way in which the *Guide* has to be interpreted. In his view, the only way to understand this abrupt change from one system of explanation to the other is by recognizing that Maimonides' public statements about the creation of the world were different from his genuine beliefs. Indeed, those presumably genuine beliefs are Aristotelian, even if this means that the highly conflictive notion of the eternity of the world is part of them. Then the final conclusions of the *Guide*, the entire *Guide* itself, offered as a "Jewish correction" of the philosophers' points of view (Strauss 1977), just show what was supposed to be showed, that the scriptures are right with respect to God's existence and the nature of his creation. At the end, contradictions are both the clues for understanding the *Guide* and some sort of smoke curtain to veil the true beliefs to the undesired readers.

Keeping the same interpretative track, but going one step beyond Strauss, E. Fackenheim has shown that Maimonides' true belief is that the world, instead of being eternally existent as Strauss claims, was created *ex nihilo*. On Fackenheim's perspective, being committed with a systematic analysis of the text from the scriptures, Maimonides decided to adopt the method of the philosophers, using demonstrative deductions in order to get true conclusions. This method is helpful with two different tasks. First, it helps Maimonides to find mistakes, misunderstandings and misinterpretations in the scriptures, things that

have confused readers in the past. Second, it provides Maimonides with an excellent tool for criticizing philosopher's approaches to the scriptures. After having unveiled successfully the most notorious problems with the way scriptures has been understood, Maimonides goes to the arguments of the philosophers about the existence of God and the creation of the world.

Fackenheim's conclusions go in the same direction as Strauss' ones do, although between them there are big differences. As Strauss, Fackenheim found that Maimonides view of the philosopher method is very supportive for their method and results in the realm of the sublunary world, but finding both methods and results mistaken when applied to the heavens. Indeed, there are two major mistakes in philosopher's approach to the supra-lunar world, one of them implicating their method, and the other the context of application of their results. With respect to the method, Maimonides declares that philosopher's statement of the necessary character of the world's being and world's nature must be disregarded because when proving the absolute character of the physical laws of the world they presuppose its point instead of proving it. They try to "derive from the nature of things which actually exist what is *absolutely* possible, impossible and necessary" (1977 303-334), something that "presupposes the *absolute* metaphysical validity of the laws by which these things are governed" (Ibid.).

What Maimonides rejects when doing so with the method of the philosophers are the (Neoplatonic) notions of eternal and necessary existence of the prime matter from which the world was created, and the (Aristotelian) impossibility of an absolute origin of the world at a particular point of time. And here he is in the field of the second of the mistakes, the philosopher's attempt to use what they had proved about the actual world to the world in the moment of its creation. Even if the laws that the philosophers found for the actual world are right, and this has been proved to be true, it does not imply that those laws have any absolute or necessary character. Indeed, Fackenheim concludes that

Maimonides does what neither the *Falasifah* nor the *Mutakallimun* had been able to do: he distinguishes sharply between the modifications of actual existence and the absolute origin of existence... [He] arrives at a *real* possibility possessed by the universe as a whole without denying, or conflicting with, the philosophical views concerning natural

law... There is *natural* necessity in the universe: sublunary beings follow as a necessary consequence if their causes are fully given; immaterial beings exist with *natural* necessity, lacking the natural potency for change or destruction. But the universe as a *whole* is in a profounder sense possible, a possibility shared by all created beings alike. (338)

This notion of the world been possible “as a whole” has a major role in the debate about the infinite character of time in the *Guide*, once Maimonides’ use of the term ‘possibility’ implies temporal disposition. In his own words,

A thing can be possible only with reference to the future, before one of the alternatives is realized; when such a realization takes place, the possibility is removed. (331)

Then, we can conclude from Fackenheim’s perspective that the very possibility for the existence of the world, for the world be created, rests on the prior assumption that there was a moment, a concrete instant in time, in which God decided to create it. Before that moment nothing existed at all, and after that moment the world ‘as a whole’ began to exist. This *ex nihilo* creation was then, Fackenheim would say, the ‘real’ belief under Maimonides words.

There is still a third perspective to take into account. Like the former two, it makes use of the contradictions as a flashlight to illuminate Maimonides’ real beliefs. Indeed, according to Herbert Davidson (1979), the logic of contradictions could be seen as the way Maimonides selected to show his own thought, but the method is only accessible to those who can decode the clues given by Maimonides all through the *Guide*³. Particularly important, says Davidson, are the theses on creation and prophecy: after having proved the existence of God, Maimonides declares there are three possible positions on the question of the creation of the world, positions Davidson names Scriptural, Platonic and Aristotelian. The Scriptural perspective states that, in accordance with the texts of the Law, the world was created from the absolute nothingness; it was an *ex nihilo* miracle only possible because of God’s will. On the other hand, the perspective that holds, following Plato, the world to be at a time both created and eternal, i.e. given form out of an

³ Despite the fact he uses them as a tool for his interpretation of the *Guide*, Davidson declares himself not being ‘completely sure’ that they are the keys to grasp Maimonides’ genuine views. See Davidson, H. “Maimonides’ Secret Position on Creation” *op. cit.* 21.

eternal matter. Finally, there is the claim of Aristotle and his followers that nothing material can be created out of something immaterial, and then, that the world must be eternal, being the causal relation between the world and its first cause both eternal and necessary. Among these three alternatives, it is obvious that Maimonides defended openly the *ex nihilo* 'scriptural' position. In fact, Davidson states in the very same way Strauss did, the main sense of the *Guide* is to make clear the truth that stands, although sometimes hidden, in the sacred texts. But, again in the same line that Strauss draws, there is a contradiction in Maimonides' defense of his arguments towards the demonstration of the world been created *ex nihilo*. Davidson points out that, while at the beginning of his discussion about the creation of the world Maimonides treated Aristotle's and Plato's positions on creation as equivalent, at the end he concludes that from a theological perspective Plato's view is closer to the scriptures than Aristotle's. With this result in his hand, Davidson proceeded both to criticize conclusions like Strauss' one, and formulate his own conclusion.

The logic of the contradictions in the *Guide* requires that in each pair of contradictory propositions, one proposition be deemed correct and the other, incorrect. Since the eternity of the world is nowise involved in the contradiction under consideration, the conclusion to be drawn cannot be that Maimonides secretly embraced the eternity of the world. The contradiction concerns the doctrine of creation from a preexistent matter, one proposition branding the doctrine as theologically unacceptable, the other acknowledging its acceptability. Maimonides would have no motive for hiding the former proposition. Therefore the contradiction, if deliberated, could only indicate that Maimonides secretly subscribed to, or secretly countenanced, creation from a preexistent matter; and in order not to shock sensitive readers, he publicly embraced the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. (22)

Additional support for this thesis is found in the interpretation that Davidson makes of Maimonides' classification of the positions on prophecy. After finding that Maimonides also divides in three positions on prophecy, namely, the one of the *ignoramuses*, the one of the philosophers, and the position of the Law, Davidson traces a correspondence between them and the former positions on creation. *Ignoramuses'* assertion that prophecy is a gift offered by God to whom

he pleases, without any special preparation required for the receiver, is compared with Scriptures' claim of creation *ex nihilo*. Philosopher's notion of prophecy as a natural and necessarily result of a life devoted to special preparation is equated with Aristotle's creation for natural necessity. Finally the position of the Law, stating that prophecy is the result of God's will action on prepared people is identified with Plato's view of creation as the action of a free will on preexistent eternal matter. Again *Guided* by the logic of contradiction, Davidson identifies a new contradiction here. This time the problem is, while Philosopher's position and Aristotle's views match perfectly, it seems to be an inadequacy with the other pair of perspectives. Indeed, Davidson shows that the matching is inverted, what Maimonides says *ignoramus* said is precisely what the scriptures affirm, and vice versa. The only reason for Maimonides misplacing of the relations must be, affirms Davidson, an attempt to distract the reader and making him believe that the thesis to be defended was the scriptural while Maimonides' esoteric belief would have to be the doctrine of creation from a preexistent matter. A conclusion that is nothing more than a replica of the previous one.

Agreement in the disagreement

What do the theses about Maimonides' beliefs on creation offer to solve our original question? Let see it case by case.

According to Strauss, Maimonides holds the eternal existence of the world, with an open commitment with Aristotle's physics; although in the topics beyond this sublunary science Maimonides seem more inclined for a platonic perspective. Despite the fact that here there is an explicit contradiction, one that Strauss tries to justify, the result that we obtain is that this position makes Craig's thesis hold naturally. Time's eternity is necessary and is guaranteed by the teleological system of actualization of potentialities. Such a thesis implies that in an infinite time all that is potentiality have to be actualized.

For eternal things are prior in substance to perishable things, and no eternal thing exists potentially. The reason is this. Every potentiality is at one and the same time a potentiality for the opposite; for, while that which is not capable of being present in a subject cannot be present, everything that is capable of being may be possibly not actual. That, then, which is capable of being may either be or not be; the

same thing, then, is capable both of being and of not being... Nor can anything which is of necessity be potential; yet these things are primary; for if these did not exist, nothing would exist. Nor does eternal movement, if there be such, exist potentially; and if there is an eternal mover, it is not potentially in motion. (Aristotle IX 1050b)

Then, being Maimonides' statement completely Aristotelian, in this respect, their thesis on time are also the same, given as a result that the eternity of time ends being necessary as Craig has stated.

On the other hand, Fackenheim's statement about Maimonides belief in creation *ex nihilo* seems to imply an opposition with the Aristotelian tradition. However, *ex nihilo* creation and Aristotle's physics are not completely incompatible once one realizes that the expression *ex nihilo* is used by Aristotle with the meaning of 'coming after a thing in time' (V 1023a), something that implies a temporal order before the world began to exist. This, of course, would be only possible with a time infinite in the past. Therefore, if we cannot say that it is a clearly guaranteed conclusion at least it must be recognized that the notion of creation *ex nihilo* does not exclude the possibility for the time to be eternal⁴.

In turn, Davidson states creation from eternal matter to be Maimonides' 'true' belief. Such a platonic argument rests on a very different account from the one of the actualization of potentialities, the central thesis on Craig's account of the third proof of God's existence. To see the connection between this conception and the thesis of eternity of time it is necessary to appeal to Maimonides' description of the platonic point of view.

They [Plato's followers] therefore assume that a certain matter has co-existed with God from eternity in such a manner that neither God existed without that matter or the matter without God⁵. (Wolfson 238)

According to Davidson, Maimonides holds this assumption not to be in disagreement with the scriptures once realized that by such an eternal matter they do not mean something of the 'same order of existence of

⁴ This idea is used to make a criticism on Davidson's approach by W. Dunphy in his "Maimonides' Not-So-Secret Position on Creation". Ormsby, E. *Studies in philosophy and the History of philosophy*. Washington: The Catholic University of America, 1989. Print.

⁵ Maimonides. M. *Guide of the Perplexed*. The quote is taken from Wolfson, H. "The Platonic, Aristotelian and Stoic Theories of Creation in Hallevi and Maimonides".

God' but something waiting for being modeled by the Creator. And under the assumption that it has been waiting forever for becoming world, then we have the same kind of conclusion that Strauss found in Maimonides personal combination of Aristotelian physics with platonic metaphysics. Again, there is no contradiction between the idea of creation out of eternal matter and the eternity of time.

Then, we arrive at the conclusion that the thesis of eternity of time, if not necessarily at the very base of the explanatory system of both God's existence and the creation of the world, is compatible with all of them. Besides, we have seen that there is no contradiction between the eternity of time and any of the current interpretations of Maimonides' Guide. If such a conclusion goes against the interpreters or for them, is something that needs to be explored.

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